

News Release

Comptroller Lierman Makes Public Statement in Response to U.S Department of Justice Settlement with University of Maryland Baltimore County

Board of Public Works agrees to \$4.14 million payment to student-athletes who were victims of sexual misconduct at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (April 3, 2024) — The Board of Public Works voted today to approve a settlement between the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) and the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ) for up to \$4.14 million. The settlement is a result of a Title IX investigation by the USDOJ into allegations of sexual discrimination and misconduct involving student-athletes with the men’s and women’s swimming and diving programs at UMBC. **Comptroller Brooke E. Lierman** voted to approve the settlement agreement alongside **Lt. Gov. Aruna Miller**, and **Treasurer Dereck Davis**. The funds would provide financial relief to student-athletes who were harmed by misconduct by the former head coach of the swim team, and failures by previous leadership to address the misconduct.

Valerie Sheares Ashby, Ph.D., who took over as president of UMBC on August 1, 2022, after the time period covered by the settlement, spoke to the Board of Public Works about UMBC’s cooperation with the DOJ probe and committed to prioritizing student safety, and work to hold people responsible for the university’s actions and inaction.

Comptroller Lierman shared her experience as a survivor of sexual assault and extended her condolences to the victims of sexual misconduct: “I offer my deepest condolences, on behalf of our state, for what you have endured. It was the deepest betrayal of trust – the trust you put into our university system. Too many adults failed too many young people,” Comptroller Lierman said. She continued: “It is clear that the university’s inaction to known sex-based harassment, including unwanted sexual

touching of male athletes as well as discrimination against female athletes, happened on an ongoing basis for years. Despite repeated pleas for help and opportunities for adults and staff, athletic administrators, and campus police to intervene, this behavior continued unchecked leading to a hostile environment and toxic culture in the UMBC community. The details, however disturbing to us, should not have been a surprise to anyone involved in that program.”

Comptroller Lierman read several excerpts from the DOJ report, which outlined detailed accounts from student-athletes of the abuse they suffered. She also emphasized the failures of UMBC to protect students entrusted to their care.

One man exploited his unchecked power and control over the students' lives but numerous individuals allowed it to happen. Students reported the coach's behavior numerous times, and the adults charged with protecting our students repeatedly failed to live up to their responsibilities. And frankly, failed to live up to any sort of generally acceptable, moral code. The findings summarized in the DOJ report emphasized that the University failed its students and failed them by not having appropriate measures or structures in place to protect them. Parents and students placed so much trust in our universities who have a duty to safeguard their students' mental, physical, and emotional well-being. During the time highlighted in the DOJ report and probably for many years prior to this report, it is clear that UMBC abdicated those responsibilities.

This issue hits very close to home for me as a student-athlete and a survivor of sexual assault as a college student. I never had to experience the kind of abuse that these students went to, but I think it's important to call out the trauma of having your institution, the school you choose, that you pay to attend, that you're on scholarship to attend, a school that you believe in, not take your claim seriously or understand how much your life matters. For the boys to be abused by the coach protected by the institution first, and the girls to be abused by boys on the team who were then protected by the institution. This betrayal is profound. When I think back on what I went through all the many years ago, I remember the administrator who believed me, supported me, and advocated for me through the process. If UMBC had appropriately trained and held staff accountable, the students who were harmed would have received the support they needed and deserved. Too many people failed to act and enabled reprehensible behavior, abuse of power and a destructive culture that marred what should have been a transformative and positive time for a young person.

I want to acknowledge President Sheares Ashby. I appreciate you meeting with me multiple times and having a transparent discussion around what happened at UMBC. I know you have already begun changes to the athletic department and culture to remove this dark chapter.

Comptroller Lierman also asked questions of President Sheares Ashby, including whether the university will ever know the full extent of the abuse suffered by its students.

“Sadly, it is possible that we will never know the entirety of the abuse and discrimination perpetrated by the swim coach, or whether individuals experienced harm but saw the lack of appropriate response from the University and were dissuaded from reporting,” Dr. Sheares Ashby said. “But the DOJ investigation has shined a light on what we believe is the scope of what occurred in that timeframe as you note. We now understand well the culture that persisted for years. And we are addressing it head-on.”

Comptroller Lierman insisted that the University System of Maryland and UMBC return to the Board of Public Works during its meeting on September 11, 2024, to report on the improvements made based on Title IX audit findings across the system and findings in the DOJ report as well as training conducted with faculty and staff leading up to the 2024-2025 academic year.

In her closing remarks, Comptroller Lierman stressed, “Title IX does not need to be rebranded. Adults, faculty, and staff need to listen to students. Student-athletes and survivors of sexual assault need to be at the table and in leadership capacities in any future discussions.”

During the April 3 meeting, the Board of Public Works approved 152 items for total state expenditures of \$396,603,611.09.

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