

The following statement was read by the Wilson family before Grand Rapids City Commission, during Public Comment at (3/29/22 meeting). This transcript can be found online at <https://gaslighting.us/resources/>

In recent years, over a dozen people have raised concerns numerous times about mistreatment at a nonprofit organization – one that exists in part because of a fiscal relationship with the City of Grand Rapids.

It has been a struggle for workers and volunteers to be taken seriously about the mistreatment. That is the fundamental problem.

Here's what people have attempted:

1. Express concerns to a supervisor.
2. Reach out to Board leadership.
3. Contact community leaders.

The problem is, no defined process exists in the nonprofit sector for seeking help. It's a building without fire exits.

A lack of response from community leaders has enabled people from the organization to go on the offensive, victim-shaming those who spoke out and implying they are to blame for the problems. These are pages taken from a familiar playbook.

Ultimately, in 2021, the victims went public. (Which is like dropping a bomb in the middle of your own life.) Resulting public pressure led to a months-long investigation at the end of the year by a law firm, the stated purpose being to discover the truth and confront any wrongdoing.

The organization asked victims and others close to the organization to volunteer their time and relive their experiences with investigators — with the understanding this would advance a dialogue about safety for workers who experience or witness abuses of power.

Months pass. The investigation is reported to be complete. For weeks, participants await a summary of the findings. A journalist is told a summary of findings will be provided. It's understood there will be considerations for privacy, but it's never been about assigning personal blame: the problem is structural.

But, then things take a turn for the worse.

The organization receives the report and they immediately suppress the findings, withholding all information about years of alleged mistreatment of staff. The board opts out of their own process for openly and honestly addressing any wrongdoing. Furthermore, they imply the report proves there was no wrongdoing by the Executive Director or Board of Directors.

If further confirmation that a problem exists was needed, we have it. The suppression of findings would only happen if there was something concerning to suppress. And now, other organizations have a model for dealing with claims of mistreatment: ignore, deny, discredit, bury the truth, and people will move on.

A summary of findings prepared by the investigators has credibility, whereas, victims' voices have been ignored (and it's weird because the investigation is a summary of their voices.) But we understood we would all see the summary.

However, now it is being suppressed, by a group of people who still, still have power over the other group of people. The report is done. It is a knowable truth. We were told this was about getting to the truth. Now, we aren't allowed to see it. None of us.

Every step of this has been unacceptable. This final step, withholding even a summary report of findings, is unacceptable. Accountability matters. Without it, we're deprived of opportunities to improve the structures that currently leave workers and volunteers at risk of harm.

I am one of those workers. Nothing can undo what has been allowed to happen to me and the many people also mistreated by this organization. But this structural problem is bigger than us. Openly confronting the issues is key to preventing the mistreatment from happening again. The nonprofit sector is not sustainable when workers are unsafe.

The idea of community is central to all the work I've done. It's sacred. I acknowledge it may be a figment of my privileged imagination. But I still believe in it.

We have to confront failing structures, in order to protect the people with boots on the ground. Otherwise we are knowingly placing them at risk, as they work to serve our communities. That has to be unacceptable. We can't just sweep these things under a rug. There's too much at stake.

Yours,
Erin Wilson