

## LOCAL NEWS

# Marin drug rehab faces sexual abuse lawsuit

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PUBLISHED: February 27, 2022 at 11:09 a.m. | UPDATED: February 27, 2022 at 11:10 a.m.

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A former client at Serenity Knolls, a residential drug treatment center in Forest Knolls, has filed a lawsuit claiming sexual harassment and abuse by a therapist there.

Victoria Vazquez alleges that James Carter, a registered alcohol and drug technician employed at Serenity Knolls during her stay there, repeatedly made inappropriate comments to her and initiated unwanted physical contact.

Vazquez, 35, filed the lawsuit on Feb. 8 in Marin County Superior Court. The suit seeks special damages, general damages, punitive damages and attorney fees.

Carter could not be reached for comment.

Vazquez, who has struggled with an addiction to heroin and amphetamines since



“I was at a crisis point,” Vazquez said in an interview. “My life was going in the wrong direction, and I wanted to change it desperately. I was willing to do whatever it took. I went to Serenity Knolls with high expectations.”

According to the suit, within a few days of her arrival at Serenity Knolls on March 8, 2021, Carter began making inappropriate comments to her, “including telling her she was beautiful and that all the men would make passes at her.”

The suit alleges that Carter repeatedly touched her intimately while whispering into her ear. The suit states that on many occasions Carter told Vazquez he wanted to have sexual intercourse with her and repeatedly asked if she was interested.

According to the suit, Carter also told Vazquez that another resident had previously filed a sexual harassment complaint against him, and he had successfully defied a request by his supervisors to sign a document acknowledging that he had acted improperly.

Finally, in April 2021, Vazquez decided she had to leave the program. She informed a female counselor there of her decision, and when pressed for a reason told the counselor it was Carter’s behavior.

Vazquez said she made it clear to the counselor that she feared retaliation from Carter and didn’t want the complaint traced back to her. Nevertheless, Vazquez believes the counselor immediately passed the information on to the center’s chief executive, Catherine McQuilkin.

The suit states that soon after, when Vazquez was outside, she saw Carter leave the premises, and as he drove away he slowed down and gave her a “terrifying, mean stare.”

The next day Vazquez left the program in a state of distress.

“I felt I couldn’t trust the staff there,” she said. “I felt more broken than when I got there.”

Vazquez quit her job as a receptionist and started couch surfing at friends’ houses because she was too afraid to sleep at her own home.

“Most disturbingly, she relapsed, fearing there was no safe place for her to quit her drug dependency,” the lawsuit says.



In an email, McQuilkin wrote, “California healthcare and privacy laws do not allow us to discuss or confirm this situation.”

“What we can say is that Serenity Knolls takes all allegations involving patient safety very seriously,” she said. “Once apprised, we take immediate and appropriate actions to ensure the situation is addressed completely and our patient population is safe. The security and well-being of our patients and staff are paramount to us.”

She would not comment on whether Carter still works at the center.

The defendants have yet to file a response with the court. A case management conference is scheduled for June 29 before Judge James Chou.

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