

Heroin addict turned counselor accused of sexually abusing 4 patients at CNY rehab center

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A photo of Robert Rosolanko that appeared in a story about his recovery from drug addiction published in 2017 by SUNY Binghamton

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Syracuse, N.Y. — A heroin addict turned counselor who publicly [shared his story of recovery](#) to inspire others struggling with addiction has been accused of sexually abusing four patients at a Syracuse area drug treatment clinic.

The four women say in lawsuits Robert Rosolanko engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior with them in 2018 while he was director of Conifer Park, an outpatient rehab program in Liverpool.

Two of the women filed their lawsuits in November under the Adult Survivors Act, a new state law that temporarily allows people to sue accused abusers and institutions that perpetuated abuse no matter how long ago the incidents occurred.

The other two women filed their lawsuits in 2020.

The women say in their lawsuits they were intimidated by Rosolanko's authority as clinical director. They say in court papers they were afraid refusing Rosolanko's advances or reporting him would jeopardize their treatment.

Rosolanko refused to be interviewed for this story. In court papers he denied the allegations.

But the Justice Center, a state agency that investigates allegations of abuse at state licensed drug treatment programs, determined the evidence shows the alleged abuse likely occurred in two of the cases.

The state revoked Rosolanko's alcohol and substance abuse counseling certification in 2020 following the sexual abuse allegations at Conifer Park.



Jessica Ingerham is one of four women suing a former drug addiction counselor for allegedly sexually abusing them. Scott Schild | sschild@syracuse.com

Engaging in sexual activity with a patient is not only an egregious breach of ethical rules but is also considered a crime under state penal law.

A patient of a health care or mental health care provider is deemed incapable under state law of consenting to sexual activity if the activity occurs during a treatment session, consultation, interview or examination.

Patients are incapable of consenting to sexual activity because the counselor or other healthcare provider has power and authority over their treatment, said Anna Kull, a New York City lawyer representing the four women.

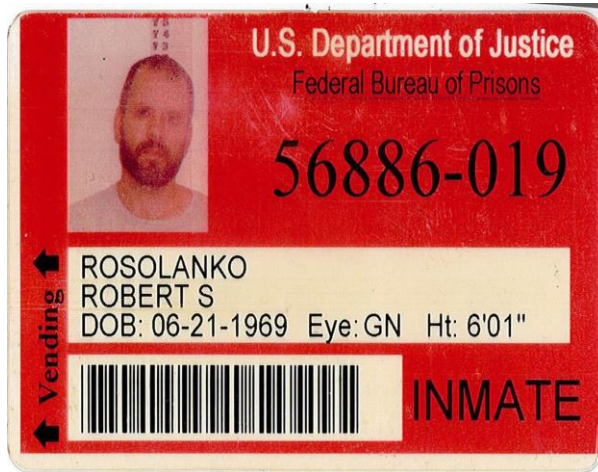
"There's a real power imbalance," Kull said.

The Justice Center forwarded its findings from the first two cases to the office of Onondaga County District Attorney William Fitzpatrick. He said his office looked into those cases, but did not file criminal charges. Fitzpatrick refused to disclose the reason his office did not press charges, saying doing so would intrude on the victims' privacy.

Kull said she didn't know why Rosolanko was not charged.

But the women now have filed lawsuits that include their names and descriptions of what they say was coerced, sexual behavior.

"I have a lot of hate for that man," Jessica Ingerham, one of the women, told syracuse.com | The Post-Standard.



Robert Rosolanko's federal inmate ID card. Before becoming an addiction counselor, he served 27 months in federal prison after being convicted of embezzling \$400,000 to support his drug habit.

From addiction and prison to counseling

[In 2016 Rosolanko got up on the stage of the Civic Center in downtown Syracuse to share his personal story of addiction and recovery](#) with about 600 people gathered at a public forum on the opioid drug epidemic.

At the time he was working as the clinical supervisor at Tully Hill, a drug and alcohol treatment center in Tully.

He became addicted to heroin after years of abusing alcohol and prescription painkillers, he has said publicly. He was using heroin and painkillers while working in California as marketing director for Home Depot. To pay for his drug habit he ended up embezzling \$400,000 from the company.

After he got caught, Rosolanko went into rehab and spent 27 months in federal prison. He told the audience he stopped using heroin in 2004.

After he was released from prison, Rosolanko earned a master's degree in social work from SUNY Binghamton and began working as an alcohol and drug abuse counselor.

"I'm here to tell you there is hope," he said at the forum. "A person in recovery can overcome these trials and create a life that will far exceed their expectations."

Rosolanko, 53, who is also a licensed social worker, now works as a bereavement counselor at a hospice in New Jersey.

'I dream he's following me'

Ethical principles and state law prohibit addiction counselors and other health providers from engaging in sexual activity with current or former patients.

Yet such behavior by counselors, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals happens frequently, malpractice insurance data and court records show.

All four of the women Rosolanko allegedly abused were vulnerable, according to the lawsuits. The alleged abuse left them emotionally and psychologically scarred, court papers say.

In addition to struggling with addiction, two of the women were sexually abused as children and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. One has multiple sclerosis. Another has a respiratory disease that requires the use of oxygen.

“I don’t think he picked his victims randomly,” said Kull, the lawyer representing the four women. “He specifically picked women who he may have thought he could easily manipulate or intimidate.”

Jessica Ingerham, one of the women, told [syracuse.com](https://www.syracuse.com) | The Post-Standard she has recurring nightmares about Rosolanko. “I dream he’s following me and then I stop and he screams in my face,” she said.

Ingerham, 42, of Mohawk, said her experience with Rosolanko has made her distrustful of therapists. She will no longer visit her psychiatrist in person, but only by telephone.

Ingerham is recovering from heroin addiction. Ingerham said she was afraid of Rosolanko because he threatened to take away her methadone, an addiction treatment medication, if she told anyone about the alleged sex abuse.

Ingerham’s lawsuit says Rosolanko repeatedly summoned her to his office where he kissed her, put his hand up her dress, pulled down her underwear and tried to have sexual intercourse with her on his desk.

Rosolanko also communicated with her via an email account he created with the username “Andrew Taylor” to avoid detection by his employer, according to the lawsuit.

“I don’t want to get fired,” he wrote in one of several emails to Ingerham contained in an exhibit included in the lawsuit.

Rosolanko admitted to some of Ingerham’s allegations when questioned by a Justice Center investigator, according to a Justice Center report filed with the court.

Rosolanko said while counseling Ingerham in his office they flirted, kissed and he touched her breasts and vagina under her clothing, according to the report.

The three other women suing Rosolanko also accused him of engaging in sexual activity with them in his office.

One of the women said in her lawsuit Rosolanko offered her money for sex. When she refused, he grabbed her, kissed her on the mouth and groped her, the lawsuit says.

The other two accused him in their lawsuits of engaging in oral sex and intercourse.



A photo of Robert Rosolanko from a 2016 syracuse.com story about his recovery from heroin addiction.

A leading cause of disciplinary action

On its website, the New York Office of Addiction Services and Support says it revoked Rosolanko's certification three years ago because he entered into a relationship with a patient that was outside the boundaries of professional conduct and engaged in sexual harassment.

That state agency's data shows that type of misconduct is a leading cause of disciplinary action against addiction counselors.

The agency has revoked the certifications of 120 alcohol and substance abuse counselors since 2009. About half those counselors were decertified because they entered into relationships outside the boundaries of professional conduct.

The agency said in a statement people applying for or renewing certification as an alcohol and drug counselor are required to complete ethics training which includes information about sexual misconduct.

The agency also said that starting in 2023 rehab programs in New York with high rates of sexual misconduct complaints will be required to educate all staff members about the issue.

Sexual abuse of patients by mental health professionals is widespread, according to the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, a mental health industry watchdog. That group's database shows about one third of criminal convictions of mental health professionals are for sexual abuse.

About 32% of professional liability claims against counselors nationwide involve sexual/romantic interactions with clients, their partners or family members, according to Healthcare Providers Service Organization, a malpractice insurance company.

Conifer Park also being sued

Rosolanko worked at Tully Hill from 2012 through 2016. He left Tully to work at Syracuse Behavioral Health, now known as Helio Health, where he served as outpatient clinical services director from 2016 to 2018.

Conifer Park hired Rosolanko in April of 2018 and he resigned in October of that year, court records show.

Conifer Park is also named as a defendant in the lawsuits by Ingerham and the three other women.

The lawsuits claim Conifer Park did not thoroughly vett Rosolanko before hiring him for a job "... where he enjoyed unfettered access to a vulnerable patient population."

The suits also fault Conifer for not properly supervising Rosolanko or investigating him before he resigned.

Conifer Park in court papers denies any wrongdoing.

The rehab center says one of its employees immediately reported Rosolanko to the Justice Center after learning of the sexual abuse allegation.

It also says in court papers Rosolanko's previous employers gave him good recommendations.

The lawsuits are seeking unspecified monetary damages.

James T. Mulder covers health. Have a news tip? Contact him at (315) 470-2245 or jmulder@syracuse.com