

**Testimony on HB 5464: An Act Concerning State Employees and Violence and
Bullying in the Workplace**

Good Afternoon Senator Prague, Senator Gomes, Senator Guglielmo, Representative Zelaski, Representative Esposito, Representative Santiago, Representative Rigby and members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee.

I am Peggy Beckett-Rinker, Executive Director of the University of Connecticut Professional Employees Association, representing more than 1,700 professional employees at the University of Connecticut Storrs Campus, the five regional campuses, the Law School and the School of Social Work.

I am here today to testify in support of House Bill 5464, An Act Concerning State Employees and Violence and Bullying in the Workplace. Workplace bullying has been a very serious problem at the University of Connecticut for a very long time and it appears to be getting worse. So much so that UCPEA's President Kathleen Sanner has requested a stand-alone policy to address employee concerns and has been promised an ombudsman to address employee concerns with abusive behavior and bullying who will report directly to the University President.

This will not in any way supplant the need for legislation that clearly defines bullying. In that regard I would like to suggest that you consider a slightly broader definition than that which is outlined in the bill to include section a (D) excluding, isolating or marginalizing a person from normal workplace activities.

I would also like to see that the program of workplace stress and violence awareness, prevention and preparedness in section (b) include awareness of workplace bullying. This program should be required of all state agencies.

The reporting requirement is essential if we are going to begin to get a handle on how serious this problem has become.

The UCPEA Women's Issues Committee is currently conducting a survey of our members on workplace bullying. The survey was designed to be anonymous and was sent out on February 8th. While we do not have the final results, I can report on the information we received as of February 14.

We have approximately 1,700 members in UCPEA. Three hundred and two members have responded to the survey at this point.

Two hundred and forty one identified themselves as female and forty seven identified themselves as male with four not responding to this optional question.

The first question asked: Do you feel that you have experienced any form of bullying in your current workplace? One hundred and twenty (40%) responded yes. One hundred and eighty one (60%) responded no.

The second question asked those who had responded yes to identify all those who used bullying by category. Eighty-one (40%) responded "by a supervisor." Seventy-two (38%) responded "by a co-worker." Twenty-five (13%) said "by a faculty member". And ten (5%) said by a student.

To the question: Do you feel that you have witnessed any form of bullying in your current workplace? One hundred and forty (47%) said "yes" and one hundred and sixty (53%) said "no".

Respondents were asked to identify the perpetrator and the victim. One hundred and four (41%) stated it was "supervisor on staff" while nineteen (7%) checked "staff on supervisor". What is even more surprising is that seventy nine respondents (31 %)

identified “staff on staff” bullying. Twenty-eight respondents (11%) indicated “faculty on staff” bullying. Respondents said they witnessed thirteen cases (5%) of staff members bullying students and eleven respondents (4%) said they witnessed faculty abuse of students.

The last question was: If you feel that you witnessed a form of bullying, did you take any action? Seventy-four (45%) said “yes” and eighty-nine (55%) said “no”.

There were seventy-four respondents who posted comments at the end of the survey. I would not want to reveal specific comments at this time but would like to give you a flavor of what they reveal. Many respondents do not believe anything will be done to stop bullying behavior until it becomes illegal in Connecticut and a sanctionable offense within the UConn community. Employees expressed concern that they had not done more when they witnessed the bullying. Others reported that while they are not “currently” in a bullying situation they had been in the past and had been able to escape by applying for and getting another position. And a number of respondents reported that they feared losing their jobs, especially in this economy, if they did anything to try to stop the bullying.

One source states: Workplace bullying is health harming conduct directed against someone in the workplace. In our survey some of the respondents reported extreme stress and depression and a need to seek medical and psychological treatment. In one extreme, a respondent reported that he/she believed a co-worker had killed himself because he was constantly bullied and harassed.

This bill will not end workplace bullying in the State of Connecticut or at the University of Connecticut, but it will define bullying and call for an annual report on the number of complaints of workplace violence or abusive conduct and the outcomes of those complaints. That is a good start.