

Testimony for SB 1035, an act concerning bullying in the workplace

I strongly support this bill. I worked at a small state agency that advocates for healthcare for Connecticut consumers, led by an appointed official. In early 2011, the office consisted of ten employees. Five of these employees eventually were terminated from this agency.

There was a new employee at that time ("A") who soon became a close friend of the leader's. This particular employee used derogatory language in describing several of the employees, and delighted in laughing at people. She was often offensive, mimicking co-workers, using sexually inappropriate language, making negative comments about other employees, making fun of peoples' names and regaling co-workers with tales of drunken family incidents. Some of these actions made me uncomfortable but I felt I couldn't discuss this with the leader because it was obvious that this employee was becoming her favorite. She found the inappropriate behavior exhibited by "A" to be amusing.

Three people in the office were suddenly placed on administrative leave, and it seemed that "A" had been instrumental in at least in one of these cases. The rest of us were instructed not to discuss or contact these individuals and it was never made clear what happened or if they would return to work. This action contributed to an atmosphere of fear and paranoia, as everyone felt "they could be next." The atmosphere in the office became increasingly toxic as "A" appeared to be running the office in spite of not being management. A Program Manager position was created to promote "A", however someone else was hired, as "A" didn't meet the qualifications. "A" bullied and intimidated this new employee frequently. We would cringe at our desks hearing this verbal abuse, but all of us feared retaliation if we aired our concerns. The new Program Manager didn't work there for very long. "A" spoke condescendingly to more than one employee. Hearing co-workers being berated with no attempt to keep conversations private was intimidating, causing not just the person being reprimanded but several others to feel victimized by the hostility being exhibited. Once I spoke to the leader about the attitude displayed by "A" and the leader rationalized her bad behavior, saying she had dealt with a death in her family and wasn't herself.

The hostility and intimidation continued. Eight people were hired; approximately two years later only two of them remained. The unfriendly atmosphere and continual turnover of staff contributes to low morale. The blatant favoritism shows disregard for other employees whose concerns are often treated dismissively. It has become a very quiet workplace where employees are afraid to talk to each other. There have been many instances of management eavesdropping on employees' conversations and then sending out scolding emails about whatever was overheard. Any ideas for workplace improvements are met with skepticism

unless they are in line with what management wants. Employees speak of the knots they feel in their stomachs as they are ascending the stairs on the way to work. Everyone has felt the tension in this office.

"A" was promoted. She immediately targeted a long time state employee as the next one to terminate. She disciplined her in a public area, allowing others to overhear the condescending tone she used. This added to the distrust felt by other employees, who wondered again who was next. The atmosphere increasingly became toxic, as employees felt bullied by the attitude displayed by this new manager, who didn't appear to have any supervisory experience. "A" was often rude and insulting, even displaying unprofessional behavior while dealing with clients. She was heard on more than one occasion arguing and yelling at clients. This was offensive to those of us who were working diligently with clients to resolve their healthcare issues, yet no one would dare speak up for fear of retaliation.

The leader and "A" have used state computers for personal use, such as the sharing of funny You Tube videos, yet others have been terminated for misusing state computers and phones. People aren't allowed to use state phones, even for emergencies. People have been punished for calling doctors and their children's schools, even for calls lasting as little as two minutes.

Former employees, some who were terminated and some who resigned, have sent letters to the Governor's office and to legislators to request an investigation into this office's unfair practices. These pleas have been unheeded. The leader is politically connected and well liked. No one wants to hear about this.

I was walked out of my job in late September 2014, and dismissed one week later. I was unfairly terminated and am fighting to regain a state job. I have a physical impairment, and I believe they are tired of my impairment and the many procedures I have undergone in attempts to alleviate it. I think what actually happened is that I must have said something someone didn't like. I was just the latest target.

I feel that the most important characteristic for any manager is to be a decent human being. Treating employees with respect and caring about them promotes workplace unity and satisfaction which contribute greatly to the success of the team. A strong, healthy workplace doesn't experience rapid turnover of staff nor does it engender fear among employees.

Please support this important bill.

Thank you.

Marilyn Rice 3/5/15