

March 10, 2015

I worked for the Office of Healthcare Advocate (OHA) from 2006 through July of 2014. I was terminated for allegations of misuse of state equipment and phone usage without and warning or counseling and despite excellent reviews for 8 years. I was one of seven employees targeted on a "witch-hunt" implemented by Victoria Veltri, Healthcare Advocate, Demian Fontanella, General Counsel and Laura Morris, a friend of Ms. Veltri's who had recently been promoted to Assistant Healthcare Advocate. The office became increasingly "toxic" after Ms. Veltri took over the office from Kevin Lembo in 2011. I became the focus of bullying after four females, three African American and one openly gay women were unfairly terminated without progressive discipline in early 2014. After the first few staff were fired, the remaining 8 of us worked in fear for who might be targeted next. When they moved my supervision from my long term supervisor, Maureen Smith to one of the office bullies I knew I was next.

Ms. Morris became my supervisor two weeks after she was promoted to Assistant Healthcare Advocate. Maureen had long been a supporter of mine and would even warn me when Ms. Veltri would make negative comments about my work behind my back. But to my face, Vicki always told me I was "doing a real good job, don't worry". I should have known better because I often heard Ms. Veltri speak poorly of Ms. Smith, a long term employee of OHA, calling her "old" "forgetful", "feeble and weak" to Ms. Smith's supervisees.

One day Ms. Veltri held an "emergency" meeting in her office with Ms. Morris, Ms. Smith and me. Ms. Veltri was reprimanding Ms. Smith in front of me (a subordinate), demanding to know why Maureen had been offering me additional assistance as the workload became excessive. Ms. Smith replied because "You are always stating that Vanessa is goofing off." Ms. Veltri was furious and jumped up in Ms. Smith's face, called her a liar and said she would "never say anything like that about anyone". Ms. Veltri added "You are off your rocker", this to an elderly woman who had been the cornerstone of OHA, and was senior management and had much longer tenure than Ms. Veltri. It was the next day when Ms. Veltri changed my supervision to Ms. Morris. Ms. Morris had always been the most unprofessional, inappropriate, abusive bully in

the office, and did so with Ms. Veltri's blessing. I was warned by Ms. Smith to "watch my back" as Ms. Veltri had waited two years to fire me.

It became clear I was the new target. After years of exceptional work at OHA, Ms. Morris stated my work was too "slow". She constantly harassed me about my sick/FMLA and vacation leave even though it had been approved by Ms. Veltri and HR. She would push me to explain why I needed the time and often threaten that she would not approve my time. The office became unbearable. Next thing I know Ms. Morris gave me a 2 page disciplinary memo outlining several "issues" going back to September of 2013. I had seen this happen to several colleagues previously and then they were fired. I immediately contacted my union.

Within days, I received a call from the union president that I was being investigated for misuse of state time. Human resources insisted I provide them with an authorization for my part-time non-state job as a part of their "investigation". Then after willingly providing them with the authorization, I was informed I was also being investigated for personal use of the state phone. The pressure continued. But then they took it a step further and took it upon themselves to question the medical documentation provided by my doctor under FMLA. The documents had already been accepted months earlier. Suddenly they were not enough. Their pressure about my about FMLA intensified. I eventually rescinded the authorization for HR to contact my part time employer, but even without the release they continued to contact them behind my back. It came to the point where my part-time employer was getting angry at me. They told me that if the state continued with their invasive, bullying tactics, they were going to have their own legal representative contact them directly. Instead of resolving the issue, Ms. Veltri became angrier and expanded the investigation into FMLA approved and used two years prior. Ms. Veltri, Ms. Morris and Patty Tiberio of HR kept bullying me to allow my doctor to provide more information on medications and other medical information not a part of the FMLA regulations. Even my doctor became agitated with them. They were reaching well beyond what is allowed under federal FMLA regulations. It was clear, they were going to do whatever they could to find a reason to terminate me even if it meant making it up.

I have witnessed the bullying and terminations/resignations over and over since Ms. Veltri was appointed. If you stand up to her or Ms. Morris, you will be the victim of bullying and retaliation. Name calling. Kicking in doors. Yelling at staff in front of their colleagues. It was unbearable. One day I asked Ms. Morris for a day off and she got really close to my face and said "No one is going to answer the phones. That's what you're getting paid for. Just do it." Later that week she again came to my desk, and threateningly pointed a finger in my face again and said I was "was out of order and I better watch out." I later cried to myself. If I had done that to her she would have filed a workplace violence complaint against me. I had seen her do that to someone who stood their ground with her before. They were terminated.

OHA's has repeatedly misused its powers under the leadership of Ms. Veltri to intimidate individuals who stand up for themselves or don't cower in their presence. She condones that most unprofessional and inappropriate behavior of both Mr. Fontenella and Ms. Morris. The words used by all three are not only abusive and intimidating but highly inappropriate and often cross the lines into racism, sexual harassment and abuse to those in other protected classes. No one dared speak until after more than 60% of us were forced out or escaped. Now we can and we have.

I couldn't take anymore. Just months from full retirement, I decided to sign a stipulated agreement and retire rather than face the extended abuse I watched three beloved colleagues go through. Their processes were ugly, vicious, personal attacks and were lead by Ms. Veltri herself with the seeming support of the administration and several state agencies including DAS, OLR, Ethics and more. No one would stop her. Ms. Veltri believes she is justified which just calls into question her ability to lead an independent agency. Ms. Veltri has no oversight. She was allowed to do whatever she wanted whenever she wanted. In the meantime, she appears to show no remorse for her egregious acts that have affected the lives of very good people. She has ruined the state careers of at least 5 hard working compassionate people. I could not fight. I needed to be sure I could keep my benefits because am my sole provider and need my medication. I did not believe anyone would hear my story. Why would I? No one was listening to the many others who have suffered through the bullying and termination before me.

My mental state and medical health was deteriorating. In signing the stipulated agreement I was told I had to give my right to file a discrimination lawsuit with CHRO. As one small example: Laura has been overheard making comments about my speech saying she can't understand my "Ebonics". I couldn't fight anymore. I just wanted out before it got worse. I was forced to sign the agreement to save all that I had worked for for 33 years.

It is amazing to me that a person who holds herself out to be an advocate for the mentally ill, could be so abusive to other human beings. Unfortunately, most of the current and former employees of OHA have had to reach out for mental health support where many had never needed to before. Many of my OHA friends are struggling with how we were treated and how to make ends meet as a result of the persistent unchecked workplace abuse and bullying by Ms. Veltri and her friends. It is corporate bullying. It has hurt so many. Most upsetting is that despite several calls out to the administration and key legislators, there has been no response and she has continued to fire and abuse more employees.

OHA is supposed to be advocate for those who need them. But what happens to those who are abused by OHA. No one is willing to help us. Who do we complain to if she is so "connected"? There is no protection when the boss controls all the resources available to the employee including HR, EAP, etc. It is outright bullying that crosses race, sexual orientation and age...and still no one responds to the request for help.

What has to happen before someone will stop this bullying? Will something be done before something even more egregious happens as a result of OHA's condoned behavior? If it takes something worse to force action, we will ensure that no one will be able to say "We didn't know."

Please support SB 1035. Thank you.

Vanessa Wimberly, former OHA employee