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H.343

Introduced by Representatives South of St. Johnsbury and Baker of West

Rutland

Referred to Committee on

Date:

Subject: Labor; unlawful employment practices; bullying; prohibition

Statement of purpose: This bill proposes to prohibit abusive treatment of employees in the workplace.

An act relating to prohibit bullying in the workplace

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

Sec. 1. FINDINGS AND PURPOSE

(a) The general assembly finds the following:

(1) The social and economic well-being of Vermont is enhanced by healthy and productive workers.

(2) Workplace bullying and harassment can cause serious harm to a targeted employee by causing the employee feelings of shame and humiliation, severe anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies, impaired immune system, hypertension, increased risk of cardiovascular disease, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

1 (3) An abusive work environment can have serious consequences for
2 employers, including reduced employee productivity and morale, high turnover
3 and absenteeism rates, and increase in medical and workers' compensation
4 costs.

5 (4) Existing discrimination laws, workers' compensation insurance, and
6 common-law tort actions are inadequate to discourage abusive behavior or to
7 provide adequate relief to all employees who are harmed by an abusive work
8 environment.

9 (b) The purpose of this act is to provide the following:

10 (1) Legal relief for employees who have suffered physically,
11 psychologically, or economically by having been deliberately subjected to
12 abusive, bullying behavior in the workplace.

13 (2) Incentives for employers to increase their awareness of the quality of
14 the work environment and to prevent and respond to mistreatment of
15 employees in the workplace.

16 Sec. 2. 21 V.S.A. § 495i is added to read:

17 § 495i. ABUSIVE EMPLOYMENT ENVIRONMENT

18 (a) For the purposes of this section,

19 (1) "Abusive conduct" means conduct that a reasonable person would
20 experience as hostile, based on its severity, nature, and frequency. Abusive
21 conduct may include repeated infliction of verbal abuse, such as derogatory

1 remarks, insults, and epithets, verbal or physical conduct that is threatening,
2 intimidating, or humiliating, efforts to sabotage or undermine an employee's
3 work performance, or attempting to exploit an employee's known
4 psychological or physical vulnerability.

5 (2) "Abusive employment environment" means circumstances in a
6 workplace in which abusive conduct toward employees occurs and is sufficient
7 to cause tangible harm to the targeted employee.

8 (3) "Adverse employment action" includes an action to terminate from
9 employment, demote, make an unfavorable reassignment, limit promotion,
10 discipline, or reduce compensation and includes a constructive discharge.

11 (4) "Constructive discharge" means a termination of employment
12 because an employee reasonably believed that he or she was subjected to
13 abusive conduct, resigned because of that conduct and prior to resigning
14 notified the employer of the abusive conduct, and the employer failed to take
15 action to correct the situation.

16 (5) "Malice" means an intention or desire to cause pain, injury, or
17 distress to another.

18 (6) "Tangible harm" means psychological or physical damage.
19 Psychological damage is the material impairment of an individual's mental
20 health, and physical damage is material impairment of an individual's physical
21 health or bodily integrity.

1 (b) It is an unlawful employment practice to subject an employee to an
2 abusive work environment and to retaliate in any manner against an employee
3 who has made a charge, testified, or assisted or participated in any manner in
4 an investigation or proceeding under this section.

5 (c) An employer shall be vicariously liable for any unlawful employment
6 practice under this section committed by any of its employees.

7 (1) If the alleged unlawful employment practice does not include an
8 adverse employment action, the employer may plead either or both of the
9 following as an affirmative defense:

10 (A) The employer exercised reasonable care to prevent and promptly
11 correct any abusive contact.

12 (B) The aggrieved employee unreasonably failed to take appropriate
13 preventive or corrective opportunities provided by the employer.

14 (2) An employer may claim as an affirmative defense that the adverse
15 employment action was taken for one or more of the following reasons:

16 (A) Poor performance, misconduct, or economic necessity.

17 (B) In response to a reasonable performance evaluation.

18 (C) In order to conduct a reasonable investigation about potentially
19 illegal or unethical activity.

20 (d) An employee who may be individually liable for a violation of
21 subsection (b) of this section may plead the affirmative defense that the

- 1 employee violated subsection (b) at the direction of the employer under the
- 2 threat of an adverse employment action.