

RI House Labor Committee
RI State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

April 30, 2024

Re: Testimony in Support of H8044 titled Workplace Psychological Safety Act

Dear Chair Corvese, First Vice Chair Messier, Second Vice Chair Alzate, and Honorable House Labor Committee members:

My name is Jennifer Fraser, and I am a member of End Workplace Abuse.

I support H8044, the Workplace Psychological Safety Act.

I have a PhD in Comparative Literature, am an award-winning educator, and author of four books, the latest about bullying and abuse: [*The Bullied Brain: Heal Your Scars and Restore Your Health*](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022). In 2012, as a teacher in a private university prep school, I reported to the administration hearing directly from students about the psychological abuse being inflicted on them by four teachers.

The administration covered up and re-victimized the 14 students who reported in detail at their request. I learned first-hand what workplace bullying is all about as I was targeted by my colleagues. In 2015, this story was front page news in Canada's most widely-read newspaper, the Toronto Star and it was part of an investigative television program CTV's W5. The school administrator's response to questioning was "no comment."

As a researcher and author, I began reading what psychologists, psychiatrists, and doctors understand about the impacts of bullying and abuse. And then, I started reading the brain research. What is critical to understand is that there is over twenty years of extensive, peer-reviewed, replicated research that shows **ALL forms of bullying and abuse can do physical damage to brain architecture. The neurological scars are visible on brain scans.**

I write a "[Bullied Brain](#)" series for Psychology Today on this serious crisis in our present-day culture that normalizes bullying and abuse. The articles indicate how disconnected the neuroscience research is from the normalized culture of bullying and abuse we presently suffer. It's extremely unhealthy and expensive to governments.

The laws that are needed compare to the laws implemented to stop smoking in the workplace when we had research that showed smoking and especially second-hand smoke was correlated with illnesses specifically cancer. The x-ray changed laws, just as today the MRI, fMRI, and EEG need to change laws.

The word “psychological” needs to be understood as “neurological” and “physiological” safety. The law needed is to create brain safety and nervous safety at work. Psychological abuses are extensively documented to do serious, life-shortening harm to brains and bodies. Their harm can be measured by brain scans, blood pressure readings, biomarkers such as cortisol, heart readings. These measurements need not be used as proof, but to ignore them is comparable to ignoring a broken bone or bruise caused by a colleague at work. They are measurements that compare to see the blackening of lungs or a cancerous tumor from exposure to a toxic work environment.

WPSA is modeled after sexual harassment law. The Supreme Court has already decided that a hostile work environment (deemed by a reasonable person) as a baseline is actionable and that psychological injury need not be proven. In keeping with that ruling, WPSA purports that a toxic work environment (deemed by a reasonable person) is the baseline for legal action. Targets should not have to prove intent (nearly impossible to do) or wait until health harm has occurred.

If an employee ends up on state healthcare, TANF, SNAP benefits, etc., at present the costs fall to taxpayers, not employers. Employers at present are not motivated to learn how much harm their employees suffer from psychological bullying and harassment. They are not motivated to get educated or change workplace culture. A legal change that holds them financially accountable will result in a serious, lasting change to how we prevent and respond to ALL forms of bullying and abuse in the workplace.

I urge you to vote in favor of H8044.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to provide public testimony.

Sincerely,

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