

I'm testifying in support of House Bill 6352, the Dignity At Work Act.

As a survivor and long-time advocate, I have connected with hundreds of targets of workplace abuse over the years. I've researched. I've listened. And I hear the same themes over and over again: employers are robbing us of all that we worked for with no consequences, and discrimination law isn't enough to help us.

Right now, women, non-white workers, workers with disabilities, workers over 40, and workers in the LGBTQ+ community simply don't have adequate protections from bias that manifests itself in abuse of power, yet we're most likely to endure abuse at work. Currently civil rights law supposedly protects us from discrimination but not without proving intent, which the courts moved to from impact in the 80s and which renders discrimination law ineffective at dismantling the social hierarchies it was aimed to dismantle. It's a huge gap in the law that's existed for far too long. When we report abuse, the vast majority of employers do nothing to address the abuse. When only 3% of workers use the system to even sue, and of those, about 58% win at settlement (often confidential) or trial but win very little according to the authors of the book *Rights on Trial*, we see a reinforcement of a culture in which employers do as they please to keep themselves in power - with no consequences. This bill fixes this widespread problem of inadequate protections for employees from bias that result in abuse that prevent women, non-white workers, workers with disabilities, workers over 40, and workers in the LGBTQ+ community from getting ahead. It's a system that's keeping the glass ceiling sturdily in place.

Perhaps former higher-up at Pinterest Françoise Brougher said it best when she said "They [higher-ups who enable toxic work cultures] make decisions behind closed doors, consciously and unconsciously excluding those who do not look, sound, or behave like them.... A distant, disengaged style of leadership creates an environment where underrepresented people do not have the social handshakes that their mostly male, mostly white counterparts have."

But doing nothing to address this problem doesn't only affect these groups. It also harms all taxpayers. Employers externalize health care costs when they ignore employee well-being internally. When abused targets leave unhealthy work environments, they become burdens of taxpayers. They're frequently uninsured, and when they get sick, they turn to ERs for care, where delivering primary care is not cost efficient. By the time they get there, their health has already deteriorated to a point where treatment expenses are far greater than earlier intervention would have been. This bill would incentivize employers to address employee well-being internally and not make it a public problem.

Numbers back up these problems. In his book *Dying For A Paycheck* (2018), Stanford professor Jeffrey Pfeffer says, "...the United States experiences about fifty-nine thousand excess deaths and about \$63 billion in incremental costs annually compared to what would be predicted given its per capita income level. Considering the total toll previously estimated (of about 120,000 excess deaths and \$180 billion in costs), our analyses indicate that about half of the deaths and about a third of the incremental costs from workplace conditions appear to be potentially

preventable if the United States were more similar to other advanced industrialized economies." (p. 59, 60). Prevention is both less expensive and more effective than remediation.

We have environmental regulations to limit environmental risks, but we don't mention the human impact of abuse. We don't leave environmental pollution to the discretion of CEOs. So why do we leave employee health up to CEOs — when CEOs too often lead in ways that serve neither the employees nor the public nor themselves when you include the hidden costs of turnover and absenteeism?

The US is the last among all Western industrialized nations to acknowledge workplace abuse adequately. As a civilized society, there ought to be limits on what companies can do to their people. We should prohibit companies from abusing workers.

Every session we don't act, we leave employees and employers to suffer and health care costs to soar. Inaction costs lives and damages the Rhode Island economy.

A safe workplace benefits not only the employee, but the public and also business in Rhode Island. Please use your power as legislators to save lives.

Respectfully submitted,
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