

Anti-bullying bill will be back soon

Proposed legislation inspired by complaints from public, private sector

BY DARAH HANSEN
VANCOUVER SUN

Workplace bullying hasn't gone away since Raj Chouhan introduced a private-member's bill in Victoria last spring, so neither is he.

"It's real, it's happening and I hope the government does something about it," said Chouhan, the NDP's labour critic and MLA for Burnaby-Edmonds.

Chouhan is one voice in a growing chorus of people in the province representing various professions and political stripes seeking legislative protection for workers who endure bullying and harassment at the hands of a peer or boss.

The issue is front and centre today, Pink Shirt Day, an annual campaign that encourages people to wear pink to symbolize public intolerance of bullies.

Robyn Durling, spokesman for BullyfreeBC, a non-partisan organization leading the push for anti-bullying legislation, said people who phone his organization in search of help to resolve a traumatic workplace situation are often surprised to learn no such regulations exist in British Columbia.

"There is a high degree of frustration ... They are very surprised there is nobody they can complain to," Durling said.

Bullying and harassment in the workplace is not new, but awareness of the problem by both employers and employees, along with a decreasing tolerance towards such behaviour, is.

Costly and high-profile harassment lawsuits — such as the recent allegations of sexual harassment and bullying made by female members and former members of the RCMP — have done much to push the issue into the public spotlight and awaken employees to their rights to a safe and respectful workplace environment.

Many companies have adopted policies in recent years aimed at preventing personal or psychological harassment of workers in a bid to reduce staff turnover, absenteeism and stress leave.

Yet the behaviour persists in B.C. and across the country.

Christian Codrington, senior manager of operations for the B.C. Human Resources Management Association, an association for human resources professionals, said the frequency of workplace bullying incidents mirrors that found in a school playground.

He cited research that found 47 per cent of adults claimed to have been bullied in their career; 27 per cent in the last 12 months. In the schools, 17 to 60 per cent of students, Grades 1 to

12, reported being bullied in the last two months, while 27 per cent said they'd been bullied in the past year.

"It is more than just a workplace issue. It starts at a young age," he said.

Codrington said repetition sets workplace bullying apart from other forms of unwanted or unwarranted behaviours that are designed to create some sort of humiliation or distress in an individual.

"It is often persistent behaviour," he said, such as a series of embarrassing emails sent out to the full work team or a boss repeatedly yelling at a person in the office.

"Often times there is a perceived threat," Codrington said.

Chouhan said he was inspired to draft the Workplace Bullying Prevention Act after hearing from "a number" of British Columbians working in both the private and public sectors.

"Their concerns were about how they were being treated by managers and, in some cases, their peers — behaviours that made them uncomfortable, vulnerable. They were wondering if there was something in the law that could help them," he said.

"When I had received several calls, then I thought I would do something about it."

The private-member's bill calls for amendments to the Workers' Compensation Act to allow incidents of psychological or physical harm caused by harassment to be investigated, compensated and dealt with in the same manner as workplace accidents.

Similar health and safety legislation already exists in Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, while Quebec includes anti-bullying wording in its labour standards.

Chouhan introduced the bill in the legislature last year where it met with widespread informal support across parties, but, so far, no action. He intends to reintroduce the bill in the next few weeks.

"It is an important issue that we really have to take very seriously. There is nothing partisan about it," he said.



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