

Written Statement in Support of the Healthy Workplace Bill

Thank you [Seantor/Assemblymember/Congressman] for the opportunity to provide my account of workplace bullying in support of the **Healthy Workplace Bill**. I want to see employers held accountable for workplace abuse. Toxic, psychologically unsafe work environments violate human rights, and work should not hurt.

The woman who bullied and blacklisted me for nine years is no longer living, so I will tell you who she is. Dr. Pat Buffler was a well-known epidemiologist and former Dean of the School of Public Health at UC Berkeley. She was also on the Board of the National Institutes of Health. She was known for her work on breast cancer and childhood leukemia. When I worked for her during the Great Recession, it was to support her as a financial analyst on a 56-million-dollar multi-school grant to research childhood brain cancers that may have been caused by pesticide drift from the agricultural fields.

I was introduced to Dr. Buffler as a possible mentor by a colleague who thought my financial and organizational background would be helpful. I had just graduated college *cum laude* as a re-entry student, and I needed a job. It was the Great Recession, and my IT tech husband and thousands of other tech workers had been laid off. So, like many other targets, I wasn't in a position to leave a job. However, I later found out that Dr. Buffler was a well-known serial bully, and I discovered that I was number 9 over a period of 15 years.

Dr. Buffler's goals were to squeeze more money out of people to gain more power. Her favorite tactic was bait-and-switch. She knew the labor policies of the university, and she used them. These policies were hidden from me before I was hired, and it took me six months of digging into them after I was hired to uncover what she had done. By telling me she would pay me a wage commensurate with my abilities and then telling me she had to bring me in two steps below my experience level, she locked me into a salary that set me back 20 years in the university system. Since there were no jobs available at that time, I was forced to use my savings, and I worked weekends on part-time jobs I had maintained during my prior return to school just to meet my basic bills.

I was also attending graduate school part-time – something that had been openly discussed and supported by Dr. Buffler – until she started taking away resources and support staff. After six months, I was so sick with constant migraines and overwork that I went to the Assistant Dean of the School. He provided me with some help, but then Pat found out and gave me more work to do. I went to the student health center to see a social worker, and they told me to quit. The only alternative was to sue Pat Buffler in the Academic Senate, which would have also ruined my career.

Finally, after one trying hand-holding session with a graduate student she had dumped on me at the last minute and faced with a weekend load of work; I could not get out of bed without feeling dizzy. So, I wrote Pat a letter telling her I knew what she was doing because I had discovered she had done this before. If I quit, the school would have to take her work “free of charge” from the grant budget, leaving her with more money to spend.

I could not find an attorney to help me because there were no laws to help me. Most people treated me as if “I deserved this,” and it was impossible to find a job because Dr. Buffler would personally tell employers that I had “abandoned” my work. (I know this because I saw her do this when I worked with her. She responded to all potential employer calls for her former students and staff.)

Although awareness of workplace bullying has improved, and the university currently has an anti-bullying policy, it is still selectively applied. As late as 2022, the San Francisco Chronicle reported ongoing bullying issues with coaches and female athletes, among others ([Players say UC Berkeley mishandled bullying claims versus soccer coach \(sfchronicle.com\)](#)). Targets need a foundational law to protect against such abuse and the power that allows others to ruin our careers, health, finances, and ability to support ourselves and our loved ones throughout our lifetimes. This is what Dr. Buffler stole from me.

You can read more about Dr. Buffler at the **The Center for Public Integrity**:
[Lauded public health researcher also worked for industry, revealing entanglements of science – Center for Public Integrity](#)

And the **Huffington Post**:
[Public Health Researcher Also Worked For Industry, Revealing Entanglements Of Science | HuffPost Impact](#)

Nanette Cowardin-Lee, Ph.D.

Founder

Essential Business Behaviors Coaching & Consulting

Member of California Healthy Workplace Advocates

Member Moderator at WBI SafeHarbor—a support community for bullied workers

Contact information:

Contact Phone Number(s):