

Bullying rife in public service

By Farrah Tomazin

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BULLYING and harassment are prevalent throughout Victoria's Government departments and public agencies, and many workers are unwilling to complain because they fear it will do them more harm than good.

The Government's own research, based on a survey of 14,000 public sector workers, found that more than one in five had been bullied or harassed by colleagues or managers in the past year. A further 40 per cent had witnessed others being abused.

Most respondents reported that the bullying took the form of psychological harassment and/or verbal abuse.

Despite the Government's pledge that whistleblowers in the bureaucracy are protected by legislation, one-third of respondents believed they would suffer if they complained about workplace problems. Half were not aware of Victoria's whistleblower protection laws. Others suspected nothing would be done if they spoke up.

The research was conducted by the State Services Authority, Victoria's new public service watchdog.

Community and Public Sector Union secretary Karen Batt said the study reinforced what the union had long known — that bullying and harassment was one of the biggest sources of complaints from its members, particular in areas such as juvenile justice and prisons.

"This is a bit of a wake-up call for the Premier and the Government," Ms Batt said. "Bullying and harassment can include the way someone is spoken to, isolation, physical intimidation or even excessive or unachievable workloads."

The research was based on a survey of almost 14,000 workers in 161 public agencies — more than 5 per cent of the state's employees. It found that most employees agreed that gender or cultural backgrounds were not barriers to success, and many were committed to their jobs.

But the *People Matter Survey 2005* identified a range of problems, including:

- One-third of public sector workers do not trust their managers' ability to deal with under-performers.

- One-third believe selection processes are unfair.

■Thirty-six per cent of staff said they had been bullied or harassed several times a month and one-fifth of cases went unreported. Indigenous workers and those with a disability are particularly likely to be victims.

Government spokesman Geoff Fraser said bullying was "unacceptable and not tolerated" and the Government ran campaigns through WorkSafe to combat the issue.

"A key role of the State Services Authority is to identify problems in the public service workforce and find solutions, and this report is part of that process," Mr Fraser said.

Stress also remains a problem for the state's 250,000 public servants, with a third reporting that they are overworked.

The findings come after figures showed that Victoria's biggest government department — Human Services — cost taxpayers \$2.4 million in WorkCover compensation for stress, anxiety or depression in 2003-04, with 195 employees affected.

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