

Transcript

Station: **ABC 612 BRISBANE** Date: **23/06/2004**
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 Compere: **STEVE AUSTIN** Summary ID: **B00014352662**

Item: **THE QLD OMBUDSMAN AND THE CMC IS INVESTIGATING ALLEGATIONS OF BULLYING, MOBBING AND VIEWING PORNOGRAPHY AT WORK ON GOVT COMPUTERS IN THE OFFICE OF LEGAL AID QUEENSLAND. REPORT.**

INTERVIEW: BONNIE HAMPSON, FORMER LEGAL AID MANAGER; SHARNIE MAKENSON*, LEGAL AID MANAGER.

Demographics:	Male 16+	Female 16+	All people	ABs	GBs
	24600	28300	53900	11900	29300

STEVE AUSTIN: Well, just be glad you're not working here. Bullying, mobbing, viewing pornography at work on government computers, this is apparently daily life in the office of Legal Aid in Queensland, according to people who have worked there.

Apparently at the moment the Queensland Ombudsman is investigating and is... as is the Crime and Misconduct Commission.

The two women who have raised the allegations, two professional administrators who were called in to bring in change of management at the office, have spoken out. This is the first time Bonnie Hampson, a former senior manager, has spoken out about her experiences. She and her equally highly

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qualified associate, Sharnie Makenson, spoke with *612 ABC Brisbane's* Caroline Page.

CAROLINE PAGE: Social justice and respect are highlighted as values in Legal Aid Queensland's mission statement. However, people working in the office have the reality to be somewhat different.

One current and one former Legal Aid Manager say they've been victims of systematic bullying within the organisation. They were hired to shake up the organisation, but say they were blocked and undermined by their own management, receiving reprisals when they attempted to carry out their duties.

Former manager Bonnie Hampson was brought into Legal Aid to bring its corporate services up to standard. What she found was an office she describes as a dysfunctional workplace fraught with systematic problems.

BONNIE HAMPSON: I think most of the problems that... of a systemic nature that I encountered in trying to deliver change within the organisation were around bullying and victimisation of staff, and that generally happened throughout the organisation. There were practices around inappropriate use of the Internet by staff, around access to pornographic sites.

PAGE: This is during work hours?

HAMPSON: This is during work hours using government equipment. And, you know, incidences of irregular work attendance by staff.

PAGE: Legal Aid Manager Sharnie Makenson still works in the office. She supports the findings of Bonnie Hampson.

SHARNIE MAKENSON: In my first two months I was asked by one of the divisional managers to please address bullying, skiving off, lots of behaviours that are inappropriate for staff in the workplace.

PAGE: While these two women where hired to bring out a change in the workplace culture of the office, they found their insights were not welcome. They say they were subjected to abuse, obstruction and direct opposition from executives of the Legal Aid office.

HAMPSON: One of things, Caroline, is when you're implementing change, of course, there's going to be, you know, some impact on staff. Staff do resist change. And when you're addressing systemic problems around behaviour there naturally will be a high level of resistance.

What you expect in any change agenda is that there is top management support for this and clear development and promulgation of all policies and procedures around the way in which we work together. None of that existed, and the senior

executives, the CEO was not in any way forthcoming in supporting that.

There were incidences involving, for example, project management training that we ran. During a two-day training session we had, what I would call, recalcitrants. Those that didn't want to know anything about project management techniques simply went through a process of hijacking the training.

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What did you do?

HAMPSON:

I spoke to the external trainer who provided that training for some hour and a half who gave me detail and detail about what the behaviour was. I spoke to the CEO about it. He was quite sympathetic to it. I mean, to be honest, I found him to be very approachable. He was... listened, he assured me that he would speak to the staff involved.

I strongly suspect that didn't happen because I received emails after that from a couple of the... from one staff member in particular giving me a couple of pages on why project management training was not needed in Legal Aid.

Other examples, one of my teams in the corporate services was going through the process of hiring an AO2, an admin officer, based on the fact that when they'd gone through the selection process they

thought this person was a nice person and probably deserved to be paid higher.

Though I received emails, and I'm not talking one or two here, I'm talking twenty email from my staff who said, well, you know, this is the way we've done it before, she's nice, she should get paid at a higher level.

They couldn't appreciate the idea of merit based selection and budget implication. I spoke to the CEO about it. I sent him the copies of the email. He didn't do anything.

My belief is that it had to come from support from the CEO. If he didn't walk the talk in terms of the changes he wanted, then it was just a façade.

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Instead, Bonnie Hampson said she suffered further for her efforts.

HAMPSON:

My experience by working there and attending senior managers is there's an acceptance of mobbing. So you would have an entire meeting of senior staff, senior managers, that would actively engage in mobbing another particular staff member.

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What is mobbing?

HAMPSON: I guess the best way to explain mobbing is when there is a conscious effort by a group of people to threaten, intimidate...

MAKENSEN: Belittle.

HAMPSON: ...another, and belittle another person with the view to have them leave.

MAKENSEN: Caroline, the difference between bullying is somebody can unintentionally bully someone by simply being a different personality, and it may not be intentional. Mobbing is quite an intentional act with a single outcome in mind, to get rid of that person.

PAGE: Within eighteen months the women say the bullying and victimisation took its toll. Bonnie Hampson suffered a cardiac event after being sacked. Sharnie Makenson still works there, saying she continues to suffer reprisals for her professional association with Bonnie Hampson.

After Bonnie Hampson's dismissal, she filed complaints to the Chair of the LAQ, Brian Kilmartin and with the Ombudsman's office. This was three years ago. She's also contacted the Premier's office in a bid to get answers. Bonnie Hampson says she's never received any acknowledgement or response from LAQ.

Sharnie Makenson, last year, lodged a complaint with the LAQ board and also provided statements to the CMC regarding Bonnie's complaints. It wasn't until this year, in February, after *The Courier-Mail* published an article about Sharnie Makenson's situation, that the LAQ board announced it would investigate her case. However, Sharnie Makenson now holds concerns as to whether her case will be treated fairly.

As to what their future plans are, Bonnie Hampson says:

HAMPSON:

My next step is to continue to do what I'm doing now, I will continue to make my weekly or fortnightly email messages to the Ombudsman's office. I'll continue to elicit the help of members of parliament. And I'm actually talking to you, Caroline and your listeners in terms of making them aware of what's happening.

But if the Ombudsman's office and the CMC think I'm going to go away, they can think again, I'm not going anywhere.

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What about you, Sharnie?

MAKENSON:

I'm not going anywhere. I want a fair and just investigation for all parties concerned, the CEO included. I'm a great believer in natural justice for both sides.



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I guess the other complainant and I believe we've had no natural justice at all. I don't want to see that happen to either the CEO or to us, and I don't want a sham investigation. And that's basically what we're talking about at this stage.

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ABC contacted the CEO of Legal Aid Queensland, however, he declined to comment. Instead the board issued a statement.

'It's aware of the complaint involving a small number of staff and senior management. This complaint was made to the CMC and is under active investigation. As a result of this, the board doesn't consider it appropriate for anyone involved to comment at this time.'

AUSTIN:

Well, we'll be following this story with interest for obvious reasons. It's quite surprising allegations. You'd think that natural justice was something that staff in the office of Legal Aid Queensland wouldn't have any difficulty getting hold of.

Bullying, mobbing, viewing pornography on government computers, well, it's obviously a range of issues occurring in that office. We'll bring you the results of the investigation by the State Ombudsman and the Crime and Misconduct Commission when they're completed. And we'll track the progress of those two women and we'll bring you the latest update as soon as we can.



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