

CSU whistle-blowers to get help from Legislature

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Two state Assembly bills moved quickly through the Senate and Assembly last week as legislators rushed to wrap up this year's work before recess.

AB 706 and AB 708 are intended to protect whistle-blowers — people who stop corruption by exposing it — within the California State University system.

AB 706 provides protection of whistle-blowers' identities and AB 708 authorizes the CSU to employ an independent investigator to look into the claims they make.

The CSU Employees Association sponsored AB 708, which was introduced by Assembly member Betty Karnette, D-Long Beach. The CSU originally opposed the bill.

"Originally, it mandated an independent investigator to look at a complaint," said Dorena Knepper, director of Governmental Affairs at CSUN. "We were not sure that it

would provide more (other) than costing everybody more money."

The extra cost had to do with AB 706, which was presented to the Assembly at the same time. AB 706, sponsored by the CSU Board of Trustees, affords employees the same shield that protects state auditors by providing identity protection to those employees who disclose wrongdoings.

The bills were drafted to fix a policy problem dealing with the anonymity of whistle-blowers in the CSU. Previously, under the Public Records Act, the complaints file would be accessible to those who filed requests for the public information.

Patti Habel, chief of staff for Karnette, said CSU employees reported they received retaliation for pointing out something that did not seem right to them.

Habel said she did not have any specific cases on hand.

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"Many witnesses came to our meeting and testified to receiving retaliation and damaged reputations for whistle-blowing," Habel said.

"(The) chancellor of the California State University system, Charles Reed, is very concerned that employees feel free to report and fix things that are wrong," Knepper said.

Despite the bill's being sponsored by the CSU Board of Trustees and drafted by an assembly member, the

CSU Employees Association sought its own bill to provide independent investigations.

"The employees wanted independent investigations for their claims versus using someone in the CSU system," said Dawn Adler, a legislative aide who had a role in organizing AB 708.

There were negotiations between the CSU and the CSU Employees Association that amended AB 708 on June 27, removing language that mandated an independent investigator for all claims. An additional amendment in the State

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— Dawn Adler,
legislative aide on AB 708

Senate called for the law, if passed, to become applicable to all CSU policies.

"Without this last amendment the process would have been far less streamlined," Knepper said.

AB 708 bypassed the Senate Appropriations Committee and received a passing vote in the State Senate. It now returns to the Assembly for a concurring approval before it is passed on to the governor later this month.

Habel said her office expects the bill to reach the governor's desk quickly.

"Even more important than the bill is getting people together to talk and communicate," Habel said.

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