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Workers with mental illnesses seek tolerance

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After spending several weeks in an inpatient psychiatric facility for treatment of bipolar disorder, Stacey, a 22-year-old Lawrence woman, returned to her job at a local business.

Several days later — and for the first time in her life — Stacey was fired.

She was given several reasons for the firing, but she thinks the real reason was the weeks she was away from work and at the treatment facility.

“I absolutely believe it was,” said Stacey, who asked that her real name not be used. Her case is being investigated by the Kansas Human Rights Commission. In her circle of friends, she’s heard other stories of people with mental illnesses being fired under similar circumstances.

Though mental illness is now protected against discrimination by the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, such cases are commonly reported in Kansas.

Of the roughly 1,000 discrimination complaints the Kansas Human Rights Commission handled in 2009, more than 300 were based on some form of disability status — including mental illness, said Ruth Glover, the agency’s associate director.

Glover’s agency has a range of options if officials believe discrimination has occurred, sometimes including legal action.

But even then, discrimination based on mental illness can be difficult to prove, said Randy Puckett, executive director of the Lawrence-based Recovery and Hope Network.

“It’s hard to prove what someone was motivated by,” said Puckett, who for years says he’s faced discrimination because of his mental illness.

And those with a mental illness are caught in a “Catch-22,” Puckett said, as employees must decide whether or not to disclose a mental illness to an employer.

Those who do disclose can receive accommodations from an employer, but then they risk discrimination because an employer is now aware of an illness not previously known to them. If they don’t disclose, it’s difficult to receive accommodations.

“It’s pretty hard to know ahead of time” how an employer will react, he said.

A big part of the problem is a misunderstanding about mental illness, said Rocky Nichols, executive director of the Disability Rights Center of Kansas. His agency works to inform the public and employers about disabilities, including

mental illness.

Nichols said mental illness isn't given the priority of physical illnesses, which can be seen and understood easily by employers.

It isn't so clear when the ailment is a mental illness, Nichols said, but the treatment by an employer shouldn't be any different.

"Just like you need so many days to recover from a physical issue," he said.

Fighting public opinion

Aside from stigma and discrimination in the workplace, Stacey said people with mental illness also face negative public opinion — particularly by people who feel those with disabilities abuse public assistance programs such as Social Security.

"It's frustrating," she said, adding that she strives not to rely on public assistance — and not to give in to the challenges of her mental illness.

"I don't consider myself disabled enough not to work," said Stacey, who is in college and hopes to work in the social services field when she graduates.

Not working, she said, "would be a tremendously boring life."

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