

Fair Political Practices Commission

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Dear Commissioners,

I am a Partner at The Strategy Group, a political consulting firm that has worked on hundreds of political campaigns throughout California and nationally. As one of the few women of color serving as a general consultant in the state, I have been deeply committed to working with candidates from diverse backgrounds, including women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals. I have seen firsthand the challenges and adversities faced by all candidates, especially those underrepresented in elected office. I have also witnessed how hostile our current political environment has become and the impact it has on candidates' mental health and, in turn, their campaigns.

Entering public life as a political candidate is a life-altering experience. Candidates also take on a lonely journey where they face the highs and lows of seeking support from potential donors, endorsers, and voters. They spend their days on the campaign trail getting rejected, judged, and ridiculed, sometimes by the people they expected to be their champions. Technological advancements have helped candidates become more accessible but have also made them more vulnerable to harassment and threats. When political advertising turns negative, a candidate will often relive a personal trauma and face the judgment of their neighbors.

We ask our candidates to shoulder these burdens without the availability or support of licensed mental health professionals. As a political consultant, I have spent hours on calls with candidates, working through their emotions triggered by a campaign activity. I've listened to candidates recount how gatekeepers have dismissed their candidacy and told them they shouldn't be running. I've had candidates whose image and likeness were distorted in an advertisement. I've monitored campaign communications channels and have read the harassing direct messages, emails, texts, and mail they receive. In those moments, a candidate would have benefited from a conversation with a therapist in addition to a political operative.

From this perspective and personal experience, I am writing to urge the Fair Political Practices Commission to support SB 1170, a crucial bill that would allow non-incumbent political candidates to utilize campaign funds for mental healthcare expenses not covered by insurance. This bill is of paramount importance as it recognizes the profound impact that campaign hostility and stress have on candidates' mental well-being, which directly affects their ability to run their campaigns and govern if elected effectively.

The research provided by California Women's List underscores the urgent need for SB 1170. The prevalence of campaign hostility, including threats, harassment, and violence directed at candidates, is alarming. Moreover, this campaign hostility disproportionately targets underrepresented candidates—with

women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color facing heightened levels of abuse and violence on the campaign trail.

The findings from California Women's List's study are sobering and indicative of a systemic issue that requires immediate attention. The adverse mental health impacts experienced by candidates during their campaigns, including sleep disturbances, anxiety, and diminished cognitive abilities, cannot be overstated. These impacts not only detrimentally affect the individual candidate but also have far-reaching consequences, as a significant portion of candidates change their strategies or otherwise struggle to meet the demands of the campaign.

Allowing candidates to use campaign funds for mental healthcare expenses is not a matter of personal use but rather a necessary campaign expenditure. Candidates' mental well-being directly impacts their ability to effectively communicate with voters and govern responsibly if elected. By addressing the mental health needs of candidates, SB 1170 ensures that our political process remains inclusive and equitable, allowing individuals from all backgrounds to participate without fear of compromising their well-being.

Furthermore, SB 1170 is consistent with the purpose of the Political Reform Act and builds upon existing precedent, such as AB 220, which allows campaign funds to be used for childcare expenses with the goal of removing a barrier disproportionately shouldered by women candidates. With a clear model for implementation already in place, SB 1170 can be integrated into existing reporting and evaluation protocols to ensure accountability and transparency.

I urge the Fair Political Practices Commission to support SB 1170 and take decisive action to address the mental health needs of non-incumbent political candidates. Passing this bill is not only a matter of necessity but also a crucial step toward fostering a more inclusive and representative democracy.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Danielle Cendejas

Partner, The Strategy Group