

Supporting the Ban on Body Size Discrimination: What Massachusetts Can Do to Promote Social Justice and Health Equity

REQUEST: The Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders urges Massachusetts lawmakers to protect residents of the state from the harmful effects of discrimination on the basis of body size. This bill aims to address this important social justice issue and if passed, will make discrimination on the basis of height and weight unlawful.

THE PROBLEM

- There are no laws or regulations protecting Massachusetts residents from discrimination based on body size. People experience discrimination in employment, housing, financing, and public accommodation due to size. The consequences of this discrimination are extremely detrimental to the health and well-being of individuals and society.
- Other personal attributes such as race, sex, and disability status are protected by law. The legal loophole for size discrimination perpetuates weight stigma and bias. The failure to include weight and height as protected attributes may provide cover for otherwise outlawed forms of discrimination.
- Size discrimination undermines public health efforts to promote healthy nutrition, physical activity, and positive body image by normalizing harmful body shaming tactics and falsely equating thin physical appearance with better health. Studies reveal that people who are considered overweight experience discrimination in health care services, educational systems, and employment and salary.
- Body size discrimination impairs child health, wellness, self-esteem, and overall welfare. Research shows that being targeted for weight-based harassment, bullying, and discrimination increase the risk of that a child will develop an eating disorder. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness and affect 30 million Americans in their lifetime.

STEPS MASSACHUSETTS CAN TAKE TO COMBAT SIZE DISCRIMINATION

- 1) Pass S.2495, which would prohibit body size discrimination
- 2) Incorporate education about size discrimination and its detrimental effects into anti-bullying school programs, health care service planning, workplace human resources training, and other management training programs
- 3) Initiate dialogue with health, business, and educational professionals to increase knowledge of the detrimental effects of sizeism on health and effective ways to mitigate this social injustice
- 4) Incorporate body diversity acceptance and positive body image training into K-12 school health curricula

Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders

<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped/>

Contact: striped@hsph.harvard.edu