ADDING BODY SIZE TO CONNECTICUT'S CIVIL RIGHTS LAW

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Context

Weight stigma and discrimination are pervasive in the United States against people with larger body sizes and especially those who have obesity. Despite clear evidence that weight discrimination is prevalent and has a harmful impact on people who are mistreated, there is no federal law that protects people against weight discrimination. In the absence of a federal law, a number of cities and states have taken legislative action to add weight and height to their civil rights laws, offering protection and a remedy to people discriminated against due to their body size.

Connecticut has a strong human rights law but has remained silent while other New England states and cities have introduced and/or passed legislation to prohibit weight discrimination. In Connecticut, 35% of adults are overweight and 30% of adults have obesity, highlighting the high number of people in Connecticut who are vulnerable to mistreatment because of their body size. **To protect Connecticut citizens from weight discrimination in employment, housing, and access to public accommodations, Connecticut should pass legislation adding body size to its list of protected categories.** This law would make body size discrimination unlawful in Connecticut, leading to lower rates of bias and unfair treatment, improving access to services, and increasing safety and quality of life for Connecticut citizens.

Weight Discrimination is Prevalent and Harmful

National research studies consistently show that weight discrimination is prevalent and experienced by 19-42% of U.S. adults with obesity. People are treated unfairly because of their body size in many domains of society including employment, healthcare, educational institutions, and the mass media. Weight discrimination is harshest for individuals at the highest weight levels, and rates of weight discrimination are typically higher for women than men. For example, in employment settings, people who have higher weight are less likely to be hired for jobs that they are qualified for, receive lower salaries compared to thinner employees (particularly for women),[1] and face stigma in the workplace from co-workers and supervisors because of their body size.

Weight discrimination is also harmful to individuals' emotional and physical health.[2] Many research studies indicate that people who are stigmatized because of their weight are at increased risk of emotional distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance use, eating disorders, suicidality), and poor physical health (e.g., increased physiological stress, cardiovascular disease risk, weight gain). Additionally, this causes those impacted to avoid healthcare.

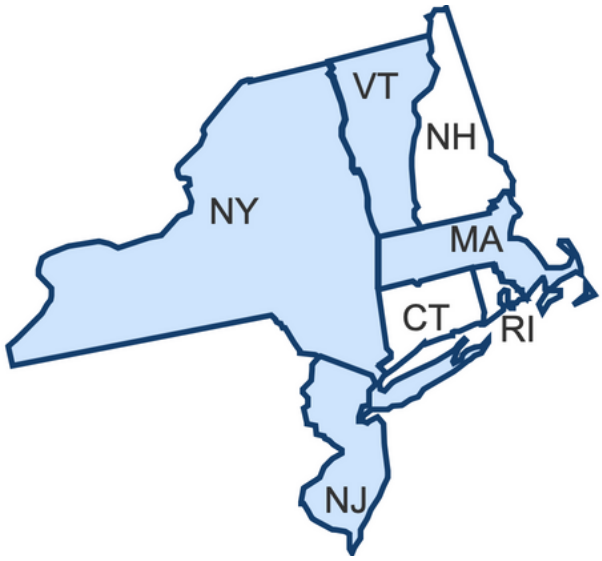
This evidence clearly shows that weight discrimination is both a social injustice and a significant public health issue. In 2020, international scientific and medical communities issued a consensus statement calling for strong and clear policies to prohibit weight discrimination. This report was published in the esteemed medical journal Nature Medicine, and was signed by more than 100 medical and scientific organizations across the U.S. and worldwide.

Today's Legal Landscape

Americans have almost no protection against weight discrimination. It remains legal most places in the country to treat people unfairly because of their body weight or size. Exceptions include Michigan and Washington where state-wide discrimination bans have been enacted. Michigan enacted the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act in 1977, which prohibits discrimination based on 10 categories, including body weight, in employment, housing, and real estate, public service, and public accommodations. **Since passing this law over 40 years ago, evidence from state-wide research in Michigan shows lower rates of weight-related employment discrimination for women compared to national rates of weight discrimination.**[3]

More recently, policy efforts have emerged in the Northeast. Massachusetts, New Jersey, Vermont, and New York have introduced state-wide bills proposing to ban weight and height discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Local jurisdictions banning weight discrimination have also been passed in cities across the country such as San Francisco (CA), Santa Cruz (CA), Washington D.C., Urbana (IL), Binghamton (NY), and Madison (WI). In 2023, New York City enacted a law amending their Human Rights Law to ban employment discrimination on the basis of a person's body size, protecting all New Yorkers, regardless of their body shape or size, from discrimination. **While these recent initiatives reflect important steps in the Northeast to address weight-based inequities, Connecticut has remained silent on this issue.**

States that recently introduced legislation to prohibit weight discrimination



Public Support for Legislation to Prohibit Body Size Discrimination

For over a decade, research has tracked public support for laws to prohibit weight discrimination in the United States.[4] **As many as 2/3 of U.S. adults support legislation that would add body weight as a protected class in their state's Civil Rights statute and for laws to prohibit weight-based employment discrimination in the workplace**.[5] This evidence indicates that the public views policy as an appropriate and needed remedy to address weight discrimination.

Policy Recommendations

Simply put, weight discrimination is prevalent in our society and impairs people's health and quality of life, and there is considerable public support for legislation to ban weight discrimination. Citizens of Connecticut deserve protection from pervasive bias, unfair treatment, and inequities due to their body size. Adding body size as a protected category in Connecticut's Civil Rights Law will help ensure that Connecticut citizens of all body sizes can access services, live fulfilling lives, and be treated with respect, dignity, and equality.

Prepared by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health, University of Connecticut

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