

November 23, 2021

**Statement of Angela Fitch, MD, FACP, FOMA
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President-Elect Obesity Medicine Association**

On behalf of the Obesity Medicine Association (OMA) -- the largest organization of physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and other health care providers working every day to improve the lives of patients affected by obesity -- I am pleased to offer our support for passage of Massachusetts Senate Bill (SB) 1127 and House Bill (HB) 1822, sponsored by Senator Rebecca Rausch and Representative Tram Nguyen, respectively. This legislation would make it unlawful to discriminate based on height and weight in compensation, in terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, housing or public accommodations in the State of Massachusetts.

As President-Elect of the OMA, Board member of the Obesity Action Coalition and founding member of the Massachusetts Coalition for Action on Obesity, I have worked to educate patients, healthcare professionals, employers, and policymakers about the complex and chronic nature of the disease of obesity. However, despite the American Medical Association recognizing obesity as a disease in 2013, many in these groups continue to treat obesity as a personal failing or character flaw.

Weight bias and stigma continue to play a role in everyday life and remains a socially acceptable form of prejudice in American society and is rarely challenged. It can be overt or subtle and occur in any setting, including employment, healthcare, education, mass media and relationships with family and friends. It also takes many forms – verbal, written, media, online and more. Weight bias is dehumanizing and damaging. It can cause adverse physical and psychological health outcomes and promotes a social norm that marginalizes people. The stress from experiencing weight bias can contribute to worsening the disease of obesity.

Research suggests that beliefs about the causality and stability of obesity are important factors contributing to negative attitudes. For example, studies show that individuals affected by obesity are more likely to be stigmatized if their overweight condition is perceived to be caused by controllable factors compared to uncontrollable factors (e.g., overeating versus a thyroid condition), and if obesity is perceived to be a condition of personal choice, versus a serious health condition.

Bias and stigma are especially prevalent in employment settings where employees affected by obesity are often viewed as less competent, lazy, and lacking in self-discipline by their co-workers and employers. These attitudes can have a negative impact on wages, promotions, and decisions about employment status for employees affected by obesity. Experimental studies also show that applicants affected by obesity are less likely to be hired than thinner applicants, despite having identical job qualifications.

Even though weight discrimination has a negative impact on people's health and wellness and results in unequal academic and job opportunities, there is only one state in the United States, Michigan, that has an anti-weight discrimination law. We must and should do better as a country to address this issue! We urge the committee to approve this critical legislation to ensure social prosperity for many people who suffer from weight discrimination in employment and other areas in the state of Massachusetts.