

The Honorable Arthur Corvese
Chair, House Committee on Labor
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chair Corvese,

I am a resident of Cranston, Rhode Island. I am also an expert on the impact weight stigma (which includes weight discrimination) on health outcomes, a health care professional, and person that would be considered living in a larger body my entire life. I write in strong support of The Nick Arjomand No Weight Discrimination Act (H 7883) introduced by Representative Enrique George Sanchez. This legislation will protect people at all sizes from exclusion and unjust treatment in employment and various public accommodations. I know the importance of this protection personally and professionally.

It is no secret that discrimination of any kind negatively impacts a person's health outcomes, ability to thrive, and ability contribute to society now, and in the future. A large body of evidence shows that weight discrimination does too. It shows that weight discrimination happens at equal or higher rates than racism, homophobia, and sexism, and that people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ also experience higher rates of weight stigma. Yet, there are no protections for from weight discrimination for Rhode Islanders.

Right now, it is legal to exclude Rhode Islanders from employment, promotions, or even fired from their jobs due their body size or weight. They can be denied tools (something as simple as a seat that fits their body) that would support their work duties, and people in larger bodies are shown to make 15-20% less than smaller bodies in employment. These things are happening here in Rhode Island, I hear about it all the time and it has even happened to me as a manager of a niche retailer. I requested a ladder that was rated for my weight plus the weight of cargo I was stocking and was told "no" and then was told "no one else has ever needed to ask for that before." Meanwhile at least six other colleagues met the criteria for a higher weight rated ladder, which was 20% of the staff.

Right now, It is legal to deny Rhode Islanders public accommodation in many settings including educational institutions because of body size or weight. I know families whose children's bodies are not accommodated in schools. One example is a child that runs to each class early to get the ONLY seat that fits their body and avoid the shame of not fitting in the small chair-desks. The family asked about expanding diverse seating options and was told that a note could be placed on the one chair that fit the child's body to save it for her. This did not solve the issue since there were other children in the classroom who did not fit well in the chair-desks either – not to mention calling out a child's body differences was too risky due to weight related bullying/discrimination the child already endures at school.

This also happened to me, a 43-year-old adult at Rhode Island College while pursuing a graduate degree. I did not fit well in the small chair-desks and almost rescinded my application to avoid the hardship and shame of not having a seat. Unlike the child previously mentioned, I endured

the humiliation of a sign on a “special table and chair.” I advocated for diverse seating options since I was not the only student who did not fit into the chair-desks. My advocacy was unsuccessful, and more chair-desks were acquired for new classrooms.

Right now, It is legal to deny Rhode Islanders public accommodation in many settings including healthcare because of body size or weight. I know many women who seek fertility treatment in Rhode Island but are turned away if their BMI is above 40. In Massachusetts, these same women can access fertility treatment. I know people who are denied surgeries due to BMI limits in Rhode Island; limits that do not exist in other states to provide the same surgeries.

I know people who seek diagnostic imaging and are often turned away due to weight or size limits on tables or machines. While Rhode Island has some diagnostic imaging with higher weight capacity, some folks have to go to Connecticut and Massachusetts to access the imaging Rhode Island does not provide. I researched where to find an MRI for a larger bodied person in Rhode Island and was recommended by staff in imaging locations that I call the Zoo or a large animal hospital. Yes, the Zoo or animal hospital. From my discussion with both places, the issue would be mostly solved through access to a higher weight capacity table, not access to the Zoo.

In addition, there is a robust body of evidence that shows the impact of weight discrimination that leads to negative health outcome. One local example of the evidence comes from our very own University of Rhode Island. The published research titled *Perceived Weight Discrimination and 10-Year Risk of Allostatic Load Among US Adults* (Vadiveloo & Mattei, 2017) showed that no matter a person’s weight, experiences of a weight discrimination posed a 2-3x increased risk to a person’s health. These risks impact cardiovascular, inflammatory, glucose metabolism, lipid/metabolic, high blood pressure, and mental health conditions.

I ask the committee to act now to pass H 7883 to protect Rhode Islanders from weight discrimination and ensure that a person’s body size or weight does not prohibit them from thriving. Jobs, education, healthcare, and employment are all social determinants of health that improve the quality of a person’s life, now and in the future.

Sincerely,

Krista Handfield