



Health at Every Size



Sustainable Agriculture

Linda Bacon, PhD

To the Legislators:

I am a researcher and professor specializing in body weight. I've studied weight and its relationship to health from the perspective of several disciplines. My three graduate degrees are in psychology, exercise physiology and nutrition. I am currently affiliated with City College of San Francisco and the University of California, Davis. I am also author of two books, one called *Health at Every Size*, and the other *Body Respect* (co-authored by Lucy Aphramor), both of which examine the science and politics of weight.

Others will provide you with very compelling testimony describing the pervasiveness of weight bias, and the pain it causes in individual lives. This is, after all, a social justice issue: people of all sizes deserve full personhood and the right to legal protection when it is denied. On that basis alone, I support the passage of this bill.

I'd like to extend the discussion by sharing my research with you, which demonstrates how valuable this law may be in improving the health of Massachusetts residents.

In my research, I examined the question of how to improve the health and well-being of people categorized as "obese." My research was a randomized controlled study, considered to be the gold standard in research. Its results have been published in well-respected scientific journals.

The study participants were women who met the medical criteria for obesity and had a history of struggling with their weight.

Half of the women were randomly assigned to a control group where they were given the conventional message that their body fat was cause for concern and were supported in attempting to reduce their weight via commonly accepted methods, including a moderate calorie restriction diet and regular exercise.

The others were assigned to a group called Health at Every Size, and were supported in accepting and appreciating their bodies. They were taught techniques to better hear and respond to their internal cues of hunger, fullness and appetite and encouraged to make choices that helped them feel good, as opposed to those that were purported to help reduce their weight.

As they learned more about the science behind weight loss, why some bodies naturally weigh more than others, why conventional recommendations to diet or exercise may not have much impact on weight in the long run, and that weight is not such an important factor in measuring one's health or worthiness anyway, an incredible transformation occurred.

In the end, the women participating in the Health at Every Size program emerged with better physical health, higher self esteem and a relationship with food that's as healthy as their improved cholesterol and

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blood pressure levels. The women participating in the diet program experienced none of these benefits, and regained the weight they initially lost. Their self-esteem plummeted.

Another large difference between the groups is that 40% of the women in the conventional diet program dropped out, compared to only 8% dropout in the Health at Every Size group.

What does this have to do with the proposed legislation? It provides us with a very different way of conceiving health promotion. It tells us that the way to solve the weight problem is to stop making weight a problem, to stop judging ourselves and others by our size. When people are supported in appreciating their bodies, regardless of size, they can move on and make better health choices. In contrast, my research shows that people are less likely to take good care of themselves when they view their bodies as wrong, when they don't feel entitled to fully inhabit their bodies.

The research is clear: weight is not an effective measure of health, and a focus on weight loss does not improve health. What we really should be concerned about is weight stigma, for it is the stigmatization and fear of fat that causes people to engage in poor health habits and deflects attention from true threats to our health and well-being.

This legislation is critical in creating a kinder, more compassionate and more just world. It will support people, both fat and thin, in acknowledging that we all have the right to inhabit our bodies, and will allow us to make healthier choices. Whether you view this from the perspective of social justice or health improvement, this law benefits Massachusetts. While it can clearly benefit the many people that are stigmatized by virtue of living in a fat body, the attitude it conveys will also help to free thinner people, many of whom live in fear of becoming fat, often engaging in unhealthy behaviors as a result.

I urge you to support it. The proposed legislation is one of the most powerful ways that we can address weight concerns in a meaningful way.

I represent my own views, and also write on behalf of the Association for Size Diversity and Health, an international organization of health professionals and advocates committed to promoting education, research, and services that enhance health and well-being, free from weight-based assumptions and weight discrimination, and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, a non-profit civil rights organization dedicated to ending size discrimination in all of its forms. One of the objectives of these two organizations is to encourage the adoption of governmental, business, and social policies consistent with this commitment.

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