Weight Bias in the Workplace: Information for Employers

What is weight bias? Weight bias refers to negative stereotypes toward overweight or obese individuals, which often leads to prejudice and discrimination. Weight bias toward persons with obesity is evident in health care, education, the media, interpersonal relationships, and in the workplace. The prevalence of weight discrimination in the United States is comparable to racial discrimination, and is even more common than gender or age discrimination in the employment setting.

What are examples of weight bias in the workplace? Employees with obesity or overweight frequently confront unfair treatment in the workplace, including the following:

- Unfair hiring practices (less likely to be hired than thinner applicants, even with identical qualifications)
- Lower wages compared to thinner employees (women with obesity earn 6% less than thinner women, and men with obesity earn 3% less than thinner men, for the identical work performed)
- Harsher discipline from employers compared to thinner employees
- Wrongful job termination
- Negative stereotypes (e.g., perceived to be lazy, less competent, undisciplined, less ambitious, less productive)

What are the consequences? In addition to the employment and economic inequities, weight bias fosters blame and intolerance that reduces quality of life for persons with overweight or obesity. Individuals who experience weight bias or discrimination are at risk for serious psychological, emotional, and health-related consequences, some of which also reinforce weight gain and obesity.

How can you reduce it?

- Identify your own potential biases.
- Remember that overweight and obese individuals are frequent targets of stigma, and they have likely made previous attempts to lose weight.
- Increase awareness of weight-based stigmatization through education.
- Address and investigate reports of weight-based bullying promptly and effectively.
- Include body weight as part of diversity training, communicating the message that weight stigma is legitimate, unacceptable, and harmful.
- Eliminate inequities for overweight/obese employees through sensitivity training for hiring staff/managers.
- Ensure fair interviewing/hiring/promotion practices for qualified candidates, regardless of their body weight.
- Include "weight" in workplace anti-bullying policies.
- Develop and implement clear non-discrimination policies that include obesity.

For more information on weight bias, please visit www.UConnRuddCenter.org