



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION TO AID FAT AMERICANS, INC.

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TEXT OF SPEECH WRITTEN AND DELIVERED BY LISBETH FISHER, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY  
OF NAAFA, AT FLORISSANT, MISSOURI, CITY COUNCIL MEETING, MARCH 26, 1979

My name is Lisbeth Fisher, and I am the Executive Secretary of NAAFA (the National Association to Aid Fat Americans, Inc.). NAAFA is a non-profit, tax exempt organization that has been fighting discrimination against fat people since 1969; in many fields, including (but not limited to) employment.

When NAAFA learned of the tactics being used against fat employees of the City of Florissant, we were appalled--but not surprised. I have come here tonight from our national headquarters in New York to appeal to your sense of fairness and humanity. Fat people have been treated over the last few decades as less than second-class citizens; yet the only thing differentiating them from other human beings is their size. Overweight people represent almost 50 percent of the population, but they are made to feel like the scum of the earth because they allegedly are gluttons who have no willpower.

Long-overdue medical research is proving this theory erroneous. In most cases, other than the compulsive eater, it will ultimately be found that obesity is caused by chemical or hormonal imbalances in the body, over which the individual has no control. Even compulsive eaters are being found to have something awry physiologically, because their body does not signal them when it is satiated. Unfortunately, too few doctors have entered the field of endocrinology and metabolism; and those who have don't know all they should about the proper diagnostic tests. Most of today's doctors are unaware that such problems do exist. They give their fat patients a diet, and when the patient doesn't lose and even gains, the doctor admonishes them. However, they see this syndrome over and over, and know full well that only 5 percent of dieters diet successfully and maintain their weight loss the rest of their lives. They also know that "yo-yoing" up and down is much more dangerous to the physical and emotional health of their patients than maintaining a weight that is not considered "ideal" for them. They are also aware of the fact that many thin people are also compulsive eaters, yet they never put on an ounce.

Last week (after eight years of finally accepting myself as a fat woman, refusing to torture myself any longer with dieting, and actually not gaining anymore weight for the first time in my life), I submitted myself to extensive metabolic testing by the eminent Neil Solomon, M.D. and Ph.D., former head of the Maryland State Department of Health, author of several books, and syndicated columnist. Among other things, he discovered that, whereas a normal person has an overall metabolic rate of 100 percent, mine is only 49 percent; a normal person burns 250 grams of carbohydrates per day, while I burn only 50; I have a high rate of histamine in my blood, indicating allergies, which are also suspected of being a cause of obesity; and that I burn only 750 calories per day. What does this mean? It means that, although I function as a very active, intelligent and productive member of society, I will never be accepted unless I nearly starve myself!

FAT is an adjective, just as short, tall, thin, blonde-haired or blue-eyed; yet society has turned it into a derogatory word. It is time it be put back into its proper perspective.



Since NAAFA was recently featured on "60 Minutes" and the "Phil Donahue Show," legislators have been coming to us. In the past, our letters and protestations fell on deaf ears.

I would like to summarize some of the legal impact on employment discrimination towards the fat person. In 1975, the City of Los Angeles revised its strict weight standards to disqualify only those individuals who were overweight of such a degree as to interfere with job performance or create a hazard to personal or general safety at work. I quote from the Board of Civil Service Commissioners' rules:

"Obesity...is extremely difficult of correction, regardless of method or level of motivation. Conversely, properly placed, the obese person can provide many years of safe work and is frequently disability-free until late middle age. Its associated risk is no greater than and may not be as great as that in other habit-related conditions, such as smoking, for which no restrictive standard exists. Routine rejection by employers of obese persons, in the face of the demonstrated difficulty of correction, impels such persons into welfare status. If the excess weight is lost for employment purposes, it is rapidly regained once the initial barrier is past."

This action followed the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which sought to limit discrimination against handicapped individuals. "Handicapped individuals" are defined, among other things, as a person who is regarded as having an impairment and is substantially limited in a major life activity, such as experiencing difficulty in securing, retaining or advancing themselves in employment because of this alleged handicap.

While fat people do not wish to be considered handicapped, if this is our only recourse at the time, we shall avail ourselves of it.

In 1976, the State of Michigan passed the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act, which rules that an employer may not discriminate against an individual on the basis of height or weight, among other things. Although it is the only state of which we know to currently have such a law, many State Human Rights Commissions have rulings based on the HEW's Section 504 referred to previously. The State of Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission is currently prosecuting such a case. Under New York State's Flynn Act, if an employer regards an obese individual as being disabled, the burden of proof is on the employer to prove the individual is unable to perform the job duties. In 1977, the New York State Division of Human Rights awarded \$5,000 to a 280-pound young man who was hired, and fired two weeks later for failing the physical exam simply on the basis of his obesity. In 1978 the State of Maine Human Rights Commission found reasonable grounds to believe that unlawful discrimination in employment because of physical handicap had occurred against an obese complainant. Last week I testified before the House of Delegates of the State of Maryland, which is trying to pass a resolution referring all obesity discrimination to the Maryland Commission on Human Relations, with the object towards banning such discrimination. The State of Wisconsin has also approached NAAFA to assist in legislation banning discrimination against fat people.

Most fat people, like most good citizens, are law-abiding, tax-paying, productive members of society. If you want your taxes to increase by forcing them onto welfare, you are providing a disservice to all your constituents.

NAAFA could not and would not support any political candidate. However, we must commend Mr. Jim Schoonover for the stand he has taken against the arbitrary and offensive weight standards imposed upon the employees of the City of Florissant.

I understand Florissant is Missouri's sixth largest city; yet its personnel are not unionized. Poor employee morale, which these weight rulings are bound to bring about, results in unhappiness, dissatisfaction, frustration, and ultimately anger, which is when the unions take over. Believe me, they too, will cost Florissant.

A few years ago, the City of New York started suspending all overweight policemen. Ultimately, it was discovered that the absentee rate was lower and the performance rate higher than their thin counterparts. The fat policemen were put back on duty, and the weight restrictions were placed where they belong--in the wastebasket!

John Gray has worked for the Florissant Police Department for twelve years, during which time he was always admittedly fat. During those years, he also received the highest praise and recommendations of his superior officers when evaluating him. He is a decorated officer, with a very high arrest record. He has been found to be physically healthy. Yet the Missouri Commission on Human Rights says he may appeal to them only if his obesity is used by a physical or psychological impairment, with the burden of proof on him. I don't know about you, but I'd rather have a fat, healthy employee working for me, than one who is not well. If John Gray or any of his co-workers pursue this matter through the HEW, the City of Florissant could be in danger of losing any Federal aid it may now be receiving.

Our best wishes go to Mr. Schoonover and Mr. Gray for sticking to their guns. We hope the Florissant City Council will see the injustice and foolishness of following its current discriminatory practices. To harass, suspend, or fire competent fat individuals is not to your benefit. Someday there will be a Federal law banning size discrimination, just as there are laws protecting the many other minorities of this great country of ours. What will you do then?

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TEXT OF JOHN GRAY'S SPEECH DELIVERED SAME DATE

I have here a petition which is submitted by employees of the City of Florissant. The petition states:

"We, the employees of the City of Florissant, petition the City of Florissant to immediately abolish the City's lose-weight-or-be-fired policy."

This petition was signed by [most] of the City's 170 employees.

Mr. Mayor, in light of this petition, I sincerely hope that you consider the ramification of this policy which has been brought to your attention many times before, and see fit to terminate this policy for the good of the employees of this City and its citizens.

As you well know, each and every day that I have reported to work in the last twelve years, I have given 100 percent in an effort to be the best police officer possible.

I have received fourteen commendations since being appointed a commissioned police officer with this City. I have attended college and graduated with an Associate Degree in the Administration of Justice. I have made more arrests than any police officer in the department. I have represented the police department in every athletic program, being elected to all-star teams in softball and roller hockey. I have never been suspended for any rules, regulations, or neglect of duty, with the exception of my suspension for being overweight.

In my annual performance evaluation report, I have been rated above average and excellent by each and every one of my supervisors.

My reward for all of this has been a suspension, because I am overweight, and numerous threats that I will be terminated, not because I am not capable to perform my duties, but because I do not meet the City's weight requirements.

The lose-weight-or-be-fired policy has brought untoward grief and anguish to me, and especially my family and to the families of every employee affected by this policy.

This policy has been the major cause of the rock-bottom morale the employees of Florissant now have, and we all know when the morale of an organization of any kind is low, every one associated with its services or goals is affected, which means every man, woman, and child in this City.



Like I have said before, I have given 100 percent to this City so you, Mr. Mayor, my family, and the citizens of Florissant could be proud of me.

I now earnestly implore you finally listen to the citizens of Florissant and its employees, so that we may get back to the job we are here to do, and immediately abolish your lose-weight-or-be-fired policy. Thank you very much.

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TEXT OF MAYOR EAGAN'S SPEECH DELIVERED APRIL 6, 1979

The City of Florissant's weight control policy has drawn much attention in the past four months, although it has been in existence for four years. During the recent City elections, my opponent used the issue as a political football. It was misconstrued, misinterpreted and presented by my opponent in an unfortunate and unreasonable light. My narrow margin of victory in Tuesday's election has convinced me that there were some people who overlooked my record as an efficient and honest administrator for fifteen years and voted for my opponent strictly over the weight issue. It proved to me that the issue has become so emotional that it would not be in the best interest of the City to proceed with it. Now that the election is over and the people have re-elected me, I have reviewed the City's weight program.

My opponent has turned our City Council meetings into a side show. I am also aware that a number of the City Council members have suffered much unjust criticism because of this program. I value the opinions of the members of the City Council and it is not my intention to involve them in this controversy.

As Mayor of Florissant it is my belief that I am a servant of the people. It is also my opinion that the major guidelines of my job are: 1. To offer my community an honest and efficient government. 2. To follow the mandate of the people. As a servant of the people of Florissant, it is my responsibility to abide by their wishes. I shall not attempt to inaugurate or maintain a policy that does not have the support of the people.

I am big enough to change it.

Effective immediately I have rescinded the weight policy.

My decision to rescind my original order is based on the fact that the issue has been completely blown out of proportion to the point that its original intent will not be served. While rescinding the policy, I wish to emphasize that the weight program I established was not done with malice against anyone. It was inaugurated in the interest of the City of Florissant--as an economy measure, as a health measure, as a better service measure.

I have requested the Chief of Police to prepare a physical fitness program for the officers in the Police Department. I am very concerned that our police officers are in good physical condition to properly handle their duties.

My approach to good government is to improve conditions and seek greater efficiency. I shall continue to work towards those ends, introducing new ideas and progressive programs. At the same time, I am pledged to listen when my community speaks.

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