

Putting an End to Unrealistic Body Expectations: What Massachusetts Can Do to Protect Mental and Physical Health

REQUEST: The Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders urges Massachusetts lawmakers to protect residents from the harmful health effects of unrealistic advertising images. This bill, introduced by Massachusetts Rep. Kay Khan, aims to lessen the impact of digitally manipulated advertisements on the health and well-being of young people in the Commonwealth. If passed, this bill will offer a tax credit to corporations that pledge to not digitally alter models' skin tone, skin texture including wrinkles, body size, or body shape in advertisements.

THE PROBLEM

- It is standard practice for photographers and digital media production specialists to correct perceived “flaws” in the appearance of models, including skin tone, wrinkles, and body shape and size.¹⁻⁴
- Viewing such unrealistic images of models can lead to body dissatisfaction,⁵ a risk factor for unhealthy weight control behaviors and eating disorders.
- Doctors are worried about the long-term effects of unrealistic, digitally altered advertising on children’s mental health as they grow and learn in an environment that promotes unrealistic body expectations. In 2011, the American Medical Association urged advertising associations to work with child health experts to create guidelines around these advertising practices.⁶
- An existing strategy to minimize this risk is to add warning labels to advertisements to identify images as having been digitally manipulated, but research says these labels actually have little effect on body satisfaction⁷⁻⁹ and can actually lead to worse self-esteem in vulnerable consumers.¹⁰

STEPS MASSACHUSETTS CAN TAKE

1. Pass H. 3892, An Act relative to mental health promotion through realistic advertising images, which would incentivize companies to use realistic images in advertisements.
2. Encourage corporations and advertisers to hire models of diverse sizes, ethnicities, skin tones, and ages.
3. Provide media literacy education in schools to teach young people how to understand and interpret advertisements and improve body image.¹¹
4. Create and implement public health campaigns to promote positive body image, eliminate weight-related bullying and discrimination, and prevent eating disorders.¹¹

Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders

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