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# DISCRIMINATION

## Study: Fat people no more lazy

### Stereotypes are just not true, Michigan researchers report

By Megha Satyanarayana Detroit Free Press

DETROIT — The fight against workplace discrimination directed at overweight and obese people gained ammunition recently with a new report that says while employers may view their larger workers as lazy, antisocial and moody, they are no different than their thin counterparts.

The research, from Michigan State University and Hope College, could have profound effects on hiring and firing in Michigan, the only state that makes obesity discrimination in the workplace illegal. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2007, 28 percent of Michigan residents were obese and 36 percent were overweight.

“Employers should be careful that they are going to get sued. They are treating employees unfairly in the first place and wasting human resources in the context that they are relying on these weight-based stereotypes,” said MSU author Mark Roehling, a lawyer and associate professor of human resources management.

And while the number of obesity discrimination suits is hard to pinpoint, they are becoming more common, he said. There is little awareness of a clause barring weight discrimination in Michigan’s 1976 Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act, he said, and there’s shame associated with an obesity claim.

He is researching how effective the 32-yearold law has been. Some cities, including San Francisco, prohibit obesity discrimination in the workplace, and Massachusetts is looking into similar legislation.

A 1999 study by Roehling indicated weight bias by employers at every stage of employment, from career counseling to salaries to firing. The current report addressed whether overweight employees fit negative productivity stereotypes. By comparing their weight, body-mass index and percentage of fat to self-reported personality traits, Roehling and his wife and co-author, Hope College psychologist Patricia Roehling, found that people with excess weight were no more likely to be lazy, noncooperative or pessimistic than those of normal weight.

“This is what we’ve hoped for for years to come out,” said Lynn McAfee, director of medical advocacy for the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination in New York. “He’s ... looked at the stereotypes and proven that they are not true.”

McAfee is a long time crusader for equal rights for overweight people. She’s spoken to the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration about tougher standards on diet products. On a personal level, in a long career as an insurance adjuster, she had to turn down an internal job as a trainer because it would have required buying two plane seats for the extensive travel.