

HOUSE No. 1677

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

PRESENTED BY:

Joan Meschino

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in General Court assembled:

The undersigned legislators and/or citizens respectfully petition for the adoption of the accompanying bill:

An Act to create access to justice.

PETITION OF:

NAME:	DISTRICT/ADDRESS:	DATE ADDED:
<i>Joan Meschino</i>	<i>3rd Plymouth</i>	<i>1/9/2023</i>
<i>Lindsay N. Sabadosa</i>	<i>1st Hampshire</i>	<i>1/27/2023</i>
<i>David Henry Argosky LeBoeuf</i>	<i>17th Worcester</i>	<i>1/27/2023</i>
<i>Sal N. DiDomenico</i>	<i>Middlesex and Suffolk</i>	<i>1/27/2023</i>
<i>David M. Rogers</i>	<i>24th Middlesex</i>	<i>2/3/2023</i>
<i>Jack Patrick Lewis</i>	<i>7th Middlesex</i>	<i>2/6/2023</i>
<i>Michelle M. DuBois</i>	<i>10th Plymouth</i>	<i>2/7/2023</i>
<i>Vanna Howard</i>	<i>17th Middlesex</i>	<i>2/9/2023</i>
<i>James B. Eldridge</i>	<i>Middlesex and Worcester</i>	<i>2/10/2023</i>
<i>Samantha Montaño</i>	<i>15th Suffolk</i>	<i>2/13/2023</i>
<i>Adrian C. Madaro</i>	<i>1st Suffolk</i>	<i>2/13/2023</i>
<i>Erika Uytterhoeven</i>	<i>27th Middlesex</i>	<i>2/22/2023</i>
<i>Natalie M. Higgins</i>	<i>4th Worcester</i>	<i>2/23/2023</i>
<i>Margaret R. Scarsdale</i>	<i>1st Middlesex</i>	<i>2/27/2023</i>
<i>Patrick Joseph Kearney</i>	<i>4th Plymouth</i>	<i>3/13/2023</i>

HOUSE No. 1677

By Representative Meschino of Hull, a petition (accompanied by bill, House, No. 1677) of Joan Meschino and others relative to access to justice for persons aggrieved by actions of intentional discrimination. The Judiciary.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

**In the One Hundred and Ninety-Third General Court
(2023-2024)**

An Act to create access to justice.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Chapter 12 of the General Laws, as appearing in the 2020 Official Edition,
2 is hereby amended by inserting after section 11N the following section:-

3 Section 11O.

4 (a) Definitions. For the purposes of this Section the following terms shall have the
5 following meanings:

6 “Age” means forty years of age or older unless a different meaning clearly appears from
7 the context.

8 “Disability” means (a) a physical or mental impairment, including, but not limited to an
9 intellectual, developmental, psychiatric, sensory or learning impairment, which substantially
10 limits one or more major life activities of a person; (b) a record of having such impairment; or (c)

11 being regarded as having such impairment, but such term shall not include current, illegal use of
12 a controlled substance as defined in section one of chapter ninety-four C.

13 “Major life activities” means functions, including, but not limited to, caring for one’s
14 self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and
15 working.

16 “Familial status” means one or more individuals (a) being or seeking to become pregnant;
17 (b) being in the process of securing legal custody of a person who has not attained the age of 18
18 years; (c) being the parent or another person with legal custody of an individual who has not
19 attained the age of 18 years and is domiciled with said parent or legal custodian; or (d) being a
20 person with whom an individual who has not attained the age of 18 is domiciled with the written
21 permission of such parent or legal custodian.

22 “Discriminatory effect” means the following: a program, policy or practice has a
23 discriminatory effect if it is reasonably foreseeable that it will have the effect of excluding or
24 partially excluding from participation, disadvantaging, harming, denying one or more benefits to,
25 causing a disparate impact upon, or otherwise discriminating against a person based on or
26 because of one or more of the person’s protected characteristics, even if not motivated by a
27 discriminatory intent. A disparate impact occurs when a program, policy or practice
28 disproportionately disadvantages persons based on or because of protected characteristics or
29 perpetuates or will tend to perpetuate segregation, even if not motivated by discriminatory intent.
30 A person claiming to be aggrieved by a Unit of Government’s program, policy or practice that
31 has a discriminatory effect may pursue a claim pursuant to subsection (c) of this Section if that
32 person has or predictably will be injured by the program, policy or practice.

33 “Legally sufficient justification” means the program, policy or practice:

34 (1) is necessary to achieve one or more identified compelling interests of the Unit of
35 Government and effectively carries out the identified interests;

36 (2) is narrowly tailored to serve the identified interests;

37 (3) the identified interests could not be served by a less discriminatory alternative; and,

38 (4) the justification is supported by evidence that is not hypothetical or speculative.

39 Demonstrating that the program, policy or practice is supported by a legally sufficient
40 justification as defined in this Section is not a defense to a claim of intentional discrimination.

41 “Person” means one or more individuals, unincorporated or incorporated organizations,
42 partnerships, associations, legal representatives, trustees, tribal governments, or receivers,
43 including individuals or organizations engaged in civil rights testing.

44 “Prevailing party” means a party who obtains some requested relief through a judicial
45 judgment or court-approved settlement agreement in that party’s favor, or whose pursuit of a
46 claim was a catalyst for a unilateral change in position by the Unit of Government relative to the
47 relief sought.

48 “Program, policy or practice” means, without limitation, one or more actions, operations,
49 policies, practices, programs, criteria and methods of administration of a Unit of Government.

50 “Protected characteristic” means race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, ancestry,
51 citizenship or immigration status, limited English proficiency, genetic information, sex, gender
52 identity or gender expression, sexual orientation, age, disability, medical condition, familial

53 status, pregnancy, status as a veteran or member of the armed forces, or recipient of public
54 assistance, rental assistance or housing subsidy, or any characteristic protected by the
55 Commonwealth.

56 “Unit of Government” means any executive office, department, agency or subdivision of
57 the Commonwealth including, without limitation, counties, cities, towns, offices, boards,
58 commissions, and authorities; any persons employed by or contracting with a unit of
59 government, and any programs or activities conducted, operated or administered by, or funded
60 directly or otherwise receiving financial or in-kind assistance from, a unit of government.

61 (b) No Unit of Government shall directly or indirectly:

62 (1) exclude or partially exclude from participation, disadvantage, harm, deny one or more
63 benefits to, or otherwise subject a person to discrimination based on or because of one or more of
64 the person’s protected characteristics; or

65 (2) adopt, implement or without limitation otherwise approve or utilize any program,
66 policy or practice that has a discriminatory effect.

67 (c) Any person or class of persons claiming to be aggrieved by a violation of subsection
68 (b) may institute and prosecute a civil action in the District, Superior, Housing, Juvenile, Family
69 and Probate, Boston Municipal, or Land Court Department for injunctive and other appropriate
70 equitable relief including an award of actual damages, and for violations of intentional
71 discrimination, an award of punitive damages. This civil action must be filed not later than three
72 years after a violation of subsection (b). Any aggrieved person who prevails in an action
73 authorized by this Section shall be entitled to an award of the costs of the litigation including
74 expert witness fees, reasonable attorneys' fees in an amount to be fixed by the court, and

75 prejudice and post-judgment interest. The attorney general may, in like manner, also
76 commence a civil action to seek relief for a violation of subsection (b).

77 (d) Burdens of proof in actions for discriminatory effect brought pursuant to this Section.

78 (1) The plaintiff has the burden of proving that a challenged program, policy or practice
79 caused or is reasonably likely to cause a discriminatory effect without having to prove intent to
80 discriminate.

81 (2) Once the plaintiff satisfies the burden of proof set forth in subsection (d)(1) of this
82 Section, the defendant has the burden of proving that the challenged program, policy or practice
83 meets all of the elements of a legally sufficient justification as defined in subsection (a) of this
84 Section.

85 (3) If the defendant satisfies the burden of proof set forth in subsection (d)(2), the
86 defendant must also prove that there is no other program, policy or practice that has a less
87 discriminatory effect which could serve the identified compelling interest or interests.

88 (e) A challenged program, policy or practice must be a contributing cause of the
89 discriminatory effect complained of but not necessarily the direct or proximate cause.

90 (f) Except for claims that are subject to administrative exhaustion within the
91 Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination as set forth in Chapter 151B of the General
92 Laws and other statutes conferring jurisdiction on the Massachusetts Commission Against
93 Discrimination, nothing in this Section is intended to require a person seeking to enforce the
94 protections afforded herein to exhaust any administrative remedies applicable to discrimination
95 claims under this Section or other laws, or to prevent or limit a person from filing a complaint at

96 the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination under the procedures set out in Chapter
97 151B of the General Laws or any other anti-discrimination law of the Commonwealth and
98 implementing regulations.

99 (g) This Act is intended to be liberally construed to effectuate the broad, remedial goal of
100 eradicating discrimination by Units of Government, whether intentionally or through an
101 unjustified discriminatory effect, and securing access to the judicial process for aggrieved parties
102 to enforce their rights for all matters that are not actionable under Chapter 151B or other laws
103 within the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. Any state or
104 federal statute or regulation, which is inconsistent with this goal or any provision of this Section,
105 or which imposes additional obstacles or restrictions on aggrieved parties, shall not apply.