



Employment discrimination and harassment based on a person's disability or perceived disability are prohibited.



Department of Fair Employment and Housing

### Filing a Complaint

Employees or job applicants who believe that they have been discriminated against or harassed because of a disability may, within **one year** of the alleged discrimination, file a complaint with DFEH by calling (800) 884-1648. DFEH processes complaints filed by persons with terminal illnesses on a priority basis.

DFEH serves as a neutral fact-finder and attempts to help the parties voluntarily resolve disputes. If DFEH finds sufficient evidence of discrimination and settlement efforts fail, the Department may file a formal accusation. The accusation may lead to either a public hearing before the Fair Employment and Housing Commission or a lawsuit filed by DFEH on behalf of the complaining party.

If the Commission or court finds that discrimination has occurred, it can order remedies including:

- Fines or damages for emotional distress from each employer or person found to have violated the law
- Hiring or reinstatement
- Back pay or promotion
- Changes in the policies or practices of the involved employer

Employees can also pursue the matter through a private lawsuit in civil court after a complaint has been filed with DFEH and a Right-to-Sue Notice has been issued.

For more information, see DFEH publication 159 "Guide for Complainants and Respondents."

For more information, contact DFEH toll free at  
**(800) 884-1684**

TTY number at **(800) 700-2320**  
or visit our web site at [www.dfeh.ca.gov](http://www.dfeh.ca.gov)

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State of California  
Department of Fair Employment & Housing

DFEH-184 (04/04)

## Employment Discrimination Based on Disability

The *Fair Employment and Housing Act* (FEHA), enforced by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH), prohibits employment discrimination and harassment based on a person's disability or perceived disability. It also requires employers to reasonably accommodate individuals with mental or physical disabilities unless the employer can show that to do so would cause an undue hardship.

The law covers mental or physical disabilities (including AIDS/HIV), regardless of whether the conditions are presently disabling. It also covers medical conditions, which are defined as either cancer or genetic characteristics.

Disability does **not** include sexual behavior disorders, compulsive gambling, kleptomania, pyromania, or psychoactive substance abuse disorders resulting from the current illegal use of drugs.

### FEHA vs. the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act

The FEHA provides broader protections for persons with disabilities than federal law. California employers with five or more employees must follow the FEHA. For example, California law has broad definitions of



The mission of the Department of Fair Employment and Housing is to protect the people of California from unlawful discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations, and from the perpetration of acts of hate violence.

mental disability, physical disability, and medical condition.

Under California law, a disability must only “limit” a major life activity. The disability does not have to involve a “substantial limitation” as under federal law, to be considered a disability. Whether a condition or disability “limits” a major life activity is determined regardless of any mitigating measure, such as medication, prosthesis, etc., unless the mitigating measure itself limits a major life activity.

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### **Employment Inquiries**

The FEHA prohibits employers either verbally or in writing from:

- Requiring any medical/psychological examination/inquiry of any applicant or employee prior to making an offer of employment
- Inquiring directly or indirectly as to whether an applicant or employee has a mental/physical disability or medical condition
- Inquiring about the nature and severity of a mental/physical disability or medical condition

However, an employer may inquire into the ability of an applicant to perform job-related functions and may respond to an applicant’s request for reasonable accommodation.

Once an employment offer has been made to an applicant, but before the start of duties, an employer may require a medical/psychological examination. However, the examination/inquiry must be job related and consistent with business necessity and all entering employees in the same job classification must be subject to the same examination or inquiry.

An employer may also conduct voluntary medical examinations, including medical histories, which are part of an employee health program. This information is retained separate and apart from employment and personnel records.

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### **Reasonable Accommodation**

The employer is required to explore with the employee all possible means of reasonably accommodating a person prior to rejecting the person for a job or making any employment-related decision. The accommodation may arise from a mitigating measure, such as medication taken for the primary disability.

An accommodation is reasonable if it does not impose an undue hardship on the employer’s business. Reasonable accommodation can include, but is not limited to, changing job duties or work hours, providing leave, relocating the work area, and/or providing mechanical or electrical aids. An employer may obtain help from government agencies and outside experts to determine whether accommodation is possible.

Employees with disabilities may be covered by the *California Family Rights Act* or the federal *Family Medical Leave Act*.

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### **Independent Medical Opinion**

An employer must allow an applicant the opportunity to submit an independent medical opinion if there is a dispute as to whether the person can perform the essential functions of a position. Failure to allow the submission of an independent medical opinion may be a separate violation of the law.

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### **Discrimination**

Any employment-related or personnel decision based on either of the following reasons is not discriminatory:

- The person is unable to perform the essential functions of the job and no reasonable accommodation exists that would enable the person to perform the “essential functions” of the job.
- The person would create an imminent and substantial danger to self or others by performing the job and no reasonable accommodation exists that would remove or reduce the danger.

The following two reasons commonly raised by employers **are not** legally acceptable excuses for discriminating against persons with disabilities:

- Possibility of future harm to the person or to others
- Employing such individuals will cause an employer’s insurance rates to rise