

U.S. NEWS

Yale sued over 'systemic discrimination' against students with mental health disabilities

Several students and an advocacy group filed a federal class action lawsuit alleging that Yale unfairly treats students struggling with their mental health.



— Yale University in New Haven, Conn., on June 12, 2015. Craig Wanga / Bloomberg via Getty Images file

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By Minyvonne Burke

Yale University is being sued over what students say is "systemic discrimination" against students with mental health disabilities.

Several students and the advocacy group Elis for Rachael filed a federal lawsuit Wednesday in Connecticut alleging that the Ivy League institution unfairly treats students struggling with their mental health and that it has failed to modify its policies to accommodate them.

A student, Alicia Abramson, said in the lawsuit, which seeks class action status, that she was struggling with depression and was forced to withdraw in October 2019, during her sophomore year, because Yale's policy does not allow students to attend part time, which would have given her the time she needed to continue school and tend to her mental health.

Another student, Hannah Neves, alleged that school officials "encouraged" her to withdraw during her junior year after she was hospitalized following an overdose of aspirin, the suit says. Neves, who had depression, said the dean of her residential college, Surjit K. Chandhoke; Yale psychiatrist Heather Paxton; and mental health and counseling director Paul Hoffman visited her in the hospital and told her it would "look bad" if she was withdrawn involuntarily.

The officials never discussed alternative accommodations with her that would have allowed her to stay at Yale while she sought mental health treatment, the lawsuit says. Chandhoke, Paxton and Hoffman, who are not named as defendants, could not immediately be reached for comment Thursday.

While Yale declined to discuss specific allegations in the suit, it said Thursday that its policies are designed to protect the health and safety of students and that it has made changes in recent years to simplify the process for people returning from medical withdrawals.

"The university is confident that our policies comply with all applicable laws and regulations. Nonetheless, we have been working on policy changes that are responsive to students' emotional and financial wellbeing," the school said.

Administrator told student she 'would be a liability,' suit says

The lawsuit says Yale's refusal to offer accommodations violates federal law. Its policies are harshest "on students with mental health disabilities from less privileged backgrounds, including students of color, students from poor families or rural areas, and international students," it says.

The policies, according to the suit, impose "unreasonable burdens on students who withdraw for disability-related reasons and discourage students from withdrawing from Yale due to a disability when that is appropriate." According to the document, students who withdraw after the first 15

days of the term can keep their health insurance plan for only 30 days, while those who withdraw within the 15 days have their insurance canceled immediately.

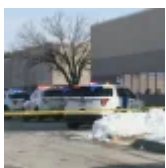
During the length of students' withdrawals, they are banned from campus and must relinquish their housing, they could lose any tuition and fees already paid, and they can be reinstated only after a prescribed minimum time, the suit says.

Neves said in the lawsuit that while she was in the hospital, she asked Paxton and Hoffman whether she could come back in the fall of 2020 and was told she could not because of the policy. The lawsuit says that during her hospital stay, she was involuntarily withdrawn from Yale and was told that she could collect her belongings from her room only with a police escort. She chose to have her mother clean out her dorm room, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit further alleges that students have to go "through a daunting reinstatement process" to come back, which includes the submission of applications, personal statements and letters of support.

Student Nicolette Mántica said in the suit that she was hospitalized in October 2017 after she "engaged in non-suicidal self-harm." During her stay, Mántica was informed that she would be withdrawn from school, with a Yale Health administrator telling her that "if anything were to happen to [her], [she] would be a liability to the university," according to the suit.

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"While in the hospital, Mántica agreed to withdraw from Yale, even though she wanted to remain enrolled," it says. "Her understanding was that, if she did not withdraw, she would be involuntarily withdrawn."

The school told Mántica that she could be reinstated for the fall 2018 term but that a reinstatement committee would consider how she spent her time away and whether she got proper mental health treatment, according to the lawsuit. It says that because she lived in a rural area of Georgia with her parents, she could not take courses at an accredited local university, one of the requirements for students who withdrew.

"Due to her poor experience with Yale and the hurdles imposed by the reinstatement process, Mántica decided to not return to Yale," the lawsuit says.

The suit says that because Neves had a student visa, she had to return to Brazil after her withdrawal, lost her insurance and forfeited some of the tuition she had already paid. To return, she had to complete two courses at an accredited university, fill out a Yale application form, submit three letters of support and interview with Yale officials.

She completed the requirements, according to the lawsuit, but "experienced trauma from being involuntarily withdrawn."

Withdrawal and reinstatement process is under review

Elis for Rachael, which is led by Yale alumni and current students, fights for better mental health accommodations at the school. It said that withdrawal is not always the best option for students and that when it is, the process to be reinstated "ought to be easy, flexible, and individualized."

In a [statement on Nov. 16](#), Yale's president, Peter Salovey, said the university has been reviewing its withdrawal and reinstatement process since September and has increased resources to support students.

"The need for student mental health and wellness support continues to increase, and Yale remains committed to responding to this need," Salovey said.

Hoffman and Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis wrote an [op-ed last month in The Washington Post](#) after an article in the newspaper detailed similar allegations from Yale students and alumni. In the op-ed, they said that only a small number of students take medical withdrawals and that the reinstatement process is "routine."

"In the past five years, well more than 90 percent of students who sought reinstatement following a medical withdrawal were approved upon their first request; that percentage rises to more than 99 percent upon a second request," they wrote.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. You can also call the network, previously known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, at [800-273-8255](tel:800-273-8255), text HOME to 741741 or visit [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/resources) for additional resources.

Minyvonne Burke

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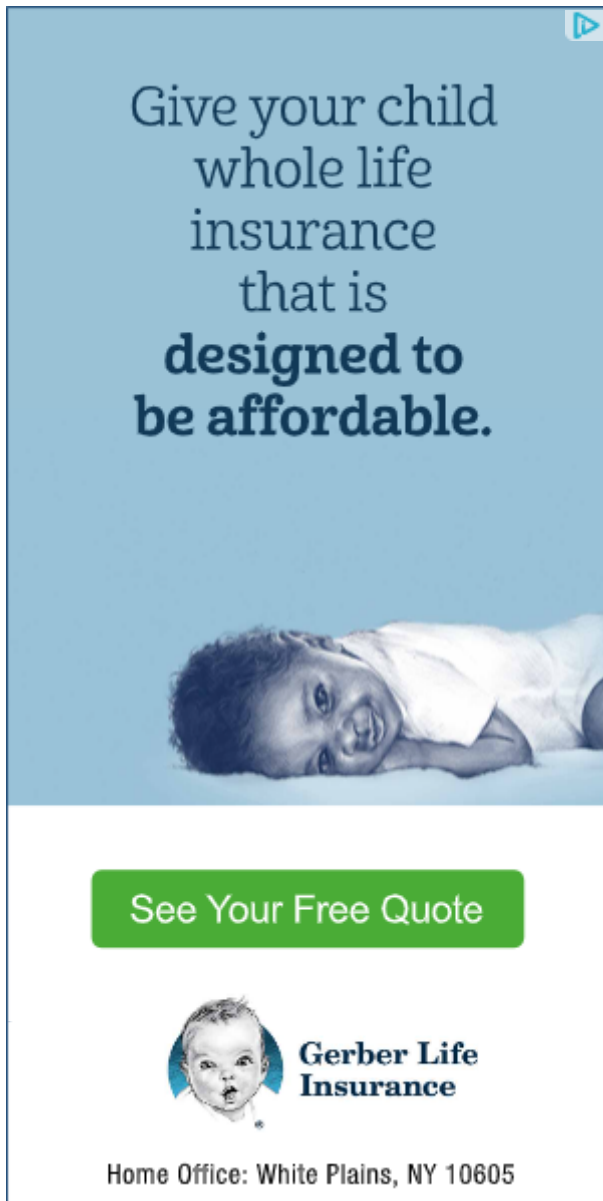
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