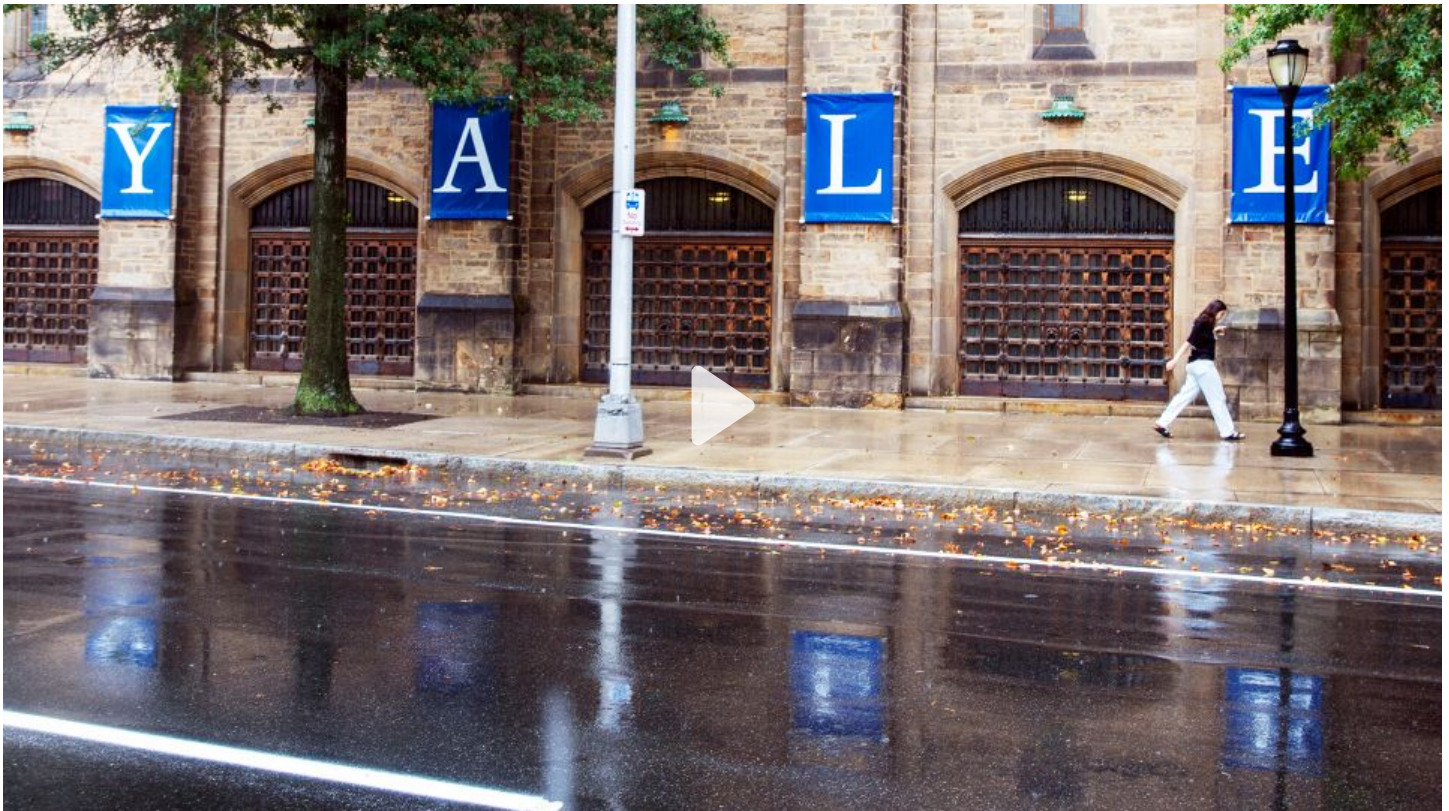


Students sue Yale University, alleging discrimination against students with mental health disabilities

By [Lauren del Valle](#), CNN

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Students sue Yale, alleging discrimination against those with mental health disabilities

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(CNN) — Current students and an advocacy group are suing Yale University and its governing body, alleging “systemic discrimination against students with mental health disabilities,” according to a lawsuit filed Wednesday in Connecticut federal court.

The lawsuit alleges the university discriminated against students with mental health disabilities and forced students to withdraw from the school after showing severe mental health disability symptoms.



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Yale officials pressure students to take “voluntary” leaves of absence for at least one or two terms when they experience significant symptoms from a mental health disability by suggesting they would otherwise face an ‘involuntary’ withdrawal,” the lawsuit alleges.

Students who withdraw from the university are barred from visiting campus and all campus activities without prior permission from the school, including in-person summer classes that are open to non-students, the lawsuit states.

The policies require students on withdrawal to move out of their campus housing within 48 hours.

Rishi Mirchandani, a Yale alumnus and plaintiff in the lawsuit, described his struggles with school when he was dealing with his own mental health crisis as a college student there.

“I think that Yale tends to wash its hands of cases of mental illness that are too severe because they don’t want to be associated with that student. They want the student to deal with their issues anywhere except Yale’s campus,” Mirchandani told CNN. “And in some instances, taking time off is a healthy decision. In other cases, it separates students from their primary support group.”

An attorney with Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law representing the students and the advocacy group said Yale’s policies are tough to navigate.

HOW TO GET HELP

• Help is there if you or someone you know is struggling with suicidal thoughts or mental health matters.

In the US: Call or text 988, the [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#). **Globally:** The [International Association for Suicide Prevention](#) and [Befrienders Worldwide](#) have contact information for crisis centers around the world.

“We’ve been doing research and collecting data on campus mental health issues nationwide and using that to inform the policy change that we advocate for on a national level. We have found Yale to be a particularly egregious example,” Monica Porter told CNN.

Yale has been reviewing its withdrawal policies since September, Yale’s president said in [a November statement](#).

“A committee of Yale College student affairs professionals and mental health experts at Yale has been meeting since September 2022 to continue the review of our withdrawal and reinstatement policies,” the statement said. “This group is poised to roll out policy changes in stages that will continue to support students.”

And the university has been working on policy changes that are responsive to students’ emotional and financial well-being, a Yale spokesperson told CNN on Wednesday in a statement.

“Yale’s faculty, staff, and leaders care deeply about our students. We recognize how distressing and difficult it is for the student and their loved ones when a student is facing mental health challenges. When we make decisions and set policies,

our primary focus is on students' safety and health, especially when they are most vulnerable. We believe in creating and sustaining strong and sensible support structures for our students, and in many cases, the safest plan includes the student's parents and family," spokesperson Karen Peart said.

"We have taken steps in recent years to simplify the return to Yale for students on medical withdrawals and to provide additional support for students. We are also working to increase resources to help students. 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," she said.

University called a student a 'liability,' suit says

The lawsuit details instances in which students were required to be accompanied by a police escort to collect their belongings from campus housing after being withdrawn from the university.

Students who leave for disability-related reasons on a voluntary or an involuntary basis often end up forfeiting chunks of their tuition and room and board payments depending on when they withdraw, and also lose their student health insurance, the lawsuit says.



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The lawsuit [cites a 2018 report](#) from the Ruderman Family Foundation that awarded Yale an "F" for its absences and withdrawal policies, behind six other Ivy League schools. One student named in the lawsuit described being called a "liability" by university officials after mental health episodes.

"If anything were to happen to (her), (she) would be a liability to the university," an official told the student, who was admitted to a local hospital after she was reported for self-harm.

The student ultimately withdrew from Yale voluntarily and graduated from another school because she couldn't afford the class requirements Yale mandated in order for her to return.

Named plaintiff Hannah Neves alleges in the suit that Yale officials visited her in the hospital after she took an overdose of aspirin in February of her junior year, pressuring her to voluntarily withdraw or be withdrawn by the school against her will.

Despite being hospitalized without access to her cell phone, the university informed her via email that she had 72 hours to leave campus, the lawsuit alleges. A native of Brazil on a student visa, Neves was forced to return to her home country on short notice. Neves was eventually permitted to return to the university for the spring 2021 semester and is on track to complete her degree next year, the lawsuit says.

School is reviewing withdrawal policies, officials say

According to the university's website, the school reserves the right to withdraw students for medical reasons when it determines that "because of a medical condition, the student is a danger to self or others, the student has seriously disrupted others in the student's residential or academic communities, or the student has refused to cooperate with efforts deemed necessary by Yale Health and the dean of Yale College to make such determinations. Each case is assessed individually based on all relevant factors, including, but not limited to, the level of risk presented and the availability of reasonable modifications."

Yale's review of withdrawal policies in recent months, followed a [Washington Post article](#) detailing similar allegations from students and alumni.



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Two Yale officials were “disappointed to read” the story, they wrote in response to it in a Washington Post op-ed, noting confidentiality prevents the school from commenting on specific cases. Continued enrollment is not always the best option for the mentally ill, and in recent years, over 90% of students who applied for reinstatement were successful on their first attempt, their op-ed claimed.

The lawsuit asks the court to approve its class-action status, alleging there are likely hundreds of current Yale students who could qualify as plaintiffs with mental health disabilities. The plaintiffs have asked the court to enjoin the university, barring the discriminatory policies it claims are illegal under federal laws, and award attorneys’ fees and costs.

A non-profit named as a plaintiff in the lawsuit, Elis for Rachael, contacted university officials in August in an attempt to resolve students’ claims without litigation, according to the lawsuit, but the parties have not met or discussed the issues raised in the complaint, it says.

“A committee of Yale College student affairs professionals and mental health experts at Yale has been meeting since September 2022 to continue the review of our withdrawal and reinstatement policies,” the statement from the university’s president said. “This group is poised to roll out policy changes in stages that will continue to support students.”

CNN’s Amir Vera, Laura Coates and Chris Boyette contributed to this report.

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