LESBIAN, GAY, AND TRANSGENDER AMERICANS AND their allies rejoiced on June 15 when the US Supreme Court announced—by a vote of 6-3—that the prohibition on sex discrimination in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 extends to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, because “it is impossible to discriminate against a person for being homosexual or transgender without discriminating against that individual based on sex.”1 The decision—Bostock v. Clayton County—immediately extended civil rights protections to millions of LGBTQ employees who work in the nearly 30 states without such express safeguards for sexual minorities.2 But for lesbian, gay, and transgender people who work in jurisdictions (like Connecticut) that already prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity as a matter of state or local law (and for lawyers who practice in those jurisdictions),3 does Bostock have anything to offer?

My answer is an emphatic yes. Most obviously, the Supreme Court’s ruling about what it means to discriminate “because of [an] individual’s … sex” will have ramifications far beyond employment law. That’s because the textualist explication in Justice Neil M. Gorsuch’s opinion for the Court is not limited to workplace protections. Accordingly, wherever federal law prohibits discrimination “because of [an] individual’s … sex,” we can expect that those protections now will extend to lesbian, gay, and transgender people, too.

That is an extraordinary development. According to Justice Alito’s dissent in Bostock, “[o]ver 100 federal statutes prohibit discrimination because of sex.” And these laws regulate a wide swath of American life, from housing, to small business loans, to military operations. Indeed, LGBTQ rights advocates exploring future impact litigation need look no further than Appendix C to Justice Alito’s opinion, which helpfully lists all 100+ statutes.

Chief among these—at least in the near term—are statutes regulating discrimination in healthcare and education. Indeed, just
three days before the Supreme Court issued Bostock, the Trump administration finalized a regulation permitting healthcare providers to discriminate against LGBTQ patients, based on a reinter-pretation of the meaning of “sex” in the Affordable Care Act.4 Bostock puts the legality of this narrowing of the ACA’s civil rights protections in serious doubt. Likewise, Title IX’s pro-hibition on sex discrimination by educational institutions that receive federal funding is likely to be extended to protect LGBTQ stu-dents, which would represent a sea change for many LGBTQ people—particularly transgender youth—and their families. And as with health-care, that ruling—if it comes—would reverse the Trump admin-istration’s current interpretation that Ti-tle IX does not protect sexual minorities.5

Circling back to employment law, the Bostock opinion seems to confirm the viability of so-called “sex stereotyping” claims, based on the Supreme Court 1989 opinion in Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins.6 In that case, Ann Hopkins alleged that she was denied part-nership at the storied accounting firm because her aggressive interpersonal communication style and gender-neutral attire did not conform to stereotypes about how a woman should act and dress. The Supreme Court agreed that her case could proceed, but it couldn’t agree on the precise reasoning, with Justice Brennan’s plurality opinion gathering only four signatures for its arti-culiation of the “sex stereotyping” rationale. In Bostock, Justice Gorsuch seems to pick up where Price Waterhouse left off, writing that Title VII prohibits employers from terminating employees for “failing to fulfill traditional sex stereotypes.”7 This anti-essential-ist theory will be useful to employment and civil rights plaintiffs of all stripes, especially those members of the LGBTQ community (such as intersex or gender non-conforming people) who might be excluded from Bostock’s focus on “homosexuality and trans-gender status.”8

Along similar strategic lines, the reasoning in Bostock likely will have the practical effect of lessening the burden on employment and civil rights plaintiffs across the board—whether or not they are LGBTQ. For the last ten or so years, following a duo of US Supreme Court opinions, employment lawyers in Connecticut and around the country have disagreed about the meaning and signifi-cance of “but-for causation,” which is the standard of proof in many employment cases.9 The defense bar has characterized the “but for” standard as a high threshold (in an effort to win more summary judgment motions), while the plaintiff’s bar in turn has tried to downplay its demands.

Bostock ends that debate. “[A] but-for test,” Justice Gorsuch’s opinion tells us, “directs us to change one thing at a time and see if the outcome changes. If it does, we have found a but-for cause.”10 Bostock continues, importantly, that events “often” have “multiple but-for causes.”11 Accordingly, “a defendant cannot avoid liability just by citing some other factor that contributed to its challenged employment decision,” because a protected status or action need only be “one but-for cause” of a decision “to trigger the law.”12 Far from being an onerous burden, then, but-for causation actually offers what Chief Justice Roberts had already acknowled-ged is a “boundless theory of liability.”13

Finally, beyond the consequences for future litigation, the sym-bolic significance of Bostock should not be underestimated. The US Supreme Court has now stated unequiv-ocally what many LGBTQ workers—in Connecticut as much as anywhere else—have been waiting decades for their federal government to say: that lesbian, gay, and transgender people are entitled to the same protections as their straight and cisgender colleagues.

Joshua Goodbaum is a partner at Garrison Levin-Epstein Fitzgerald & Pirrotti PC in New Haven, where he represents individuals in employment and civil rights matters and assists other lawyers with appeals. He is an elected member of the CBA House of Delegates and previously served as chair of CBA’s Labor & Employment Law Section.

NOTES
3. For LGBTQ anti-discrimination protections in Connecticut, see Chapter 814c of the General Statutes.
8. E.g., id. at 1742.
11. Id.
12. Id.