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Testimony of Kuldip Singh before the New York City Council's Civil Service and Labour Committee

Kuldip Singh

President of UNITED SIKHS, *Member of American Sikh Consultative Forum*

Good afternoon Chairman, Joseph Addabbo, Council Member David Weprin who introduced Uniform an Anti-Discrimination Bill, Council Members of the Civil Service and Labour Committee, members of the Sikh community and the public at large present at this hearing. I thank you for this opportunity to testify today.

My name is Kuldip Singh. I am the president of UNITED SIKHS, a member of the American Sikh Consultative Forum, ASCF, which is headquartered in New York and which serves the Sikh community of New York. My concern today is to express the importance of the Uniform and Discrimination Bill, the Intro 577 bill.

Survival of a community consists of its continued ability to make a free public expression of its identity. For a small minority the fear that an affirmation of identity might invite hostility, in word, deed or attitude, from a relatively homogenous and dominant majority, is the primary cause of stress..

The Sikh identity is proclaimed by the 5Ks viz. *kes* (unshorn hair), *kangha* (a wooden comb in the hair), *kachhaera* (a type of shorts), *kara* (a steel bangle), and *kirpan* (a scimitar). **Besides, a Sikh is required to wear a Turban (Dastaar). A Sikh with a turban (and beard in the case of a Sikh man) stands out in a crowd. This high visibility makes the Sikhs a special minority.**

The Sikh presence in America is not relatively new, and the composition of this community has changed considerably over the years. After a slow growth primarily through immigration, the size of the community has increased rapidly since the mid 1960s. The attitudes of the host society have also changed. Although Sikhs have existed in the United States Of America for almost 100+ years.

Early Sikh immigrants had to face legal, social, economic and even physical barriers to material success. Unable to bring their families from Panjab, or arrange for marriage to Punjabi women, they could not pass on their attachment to Panjab culture, and the Sikh religion to the next generation.

Later, highly educated immigrants too had to face difficulties in employment, accommodations, professional advancement and education of their children, in spite of the existence of anti-discrimination laws and absence of restrictions on acquiring property.

A common question at job interviews has been: “Are you prepared to adopt the American dress?” The real question is: “Are you willing to cut your hair?” Sikh employees who became citizens are asked by their supervisors if they plan to cut their hair. Discouraged in their quest for employment in their fields of specialization, or having had unpleasant experience of the job with respect to advancement and recognition, many highly qualified engineers and scientists have found alternative careers in owner-operated businesses.

There are cases of Sikhs with Master’s degrees unable to find any employment primarily because of the reluctance of the employers in hiring “different looking guys.” In looking for housing, this writer was once told by a landlady: “We do not rent apartments to people with whiskers.” In 1978, an American Sikh citizen accompanying his wife at her naturalization was ordered by the U.S. District Judge to remove his turban or leave the Court. In 1982, an American Sikh was told⁵ by his employer to comply with the new safety policy that directed men to be without a beard. In 1984, a Deputy Registrar in Ohio refused⁶ to renew the driving license because the American Sikh would not agree to have a picture taken without his turban. In 2005, a Sikh in Atlanta was asked to take his turban off before he entered the court room as wearing a head gear was a disrespect to the court-room.

The Intro 577 Bill will allow Sikhs to serve their country without sacrificing on their religious sentiments. Tomorrow our children will not have to choose between serving their passion and their religious identity from which stems their resolve to stand up for justice and the call to the countries duty.

This bill in now way would dampen the spirit of the nature of the work of the city agencies, having a Sikh serving on New York City streets or in visible positions would help to reduce hate crime. Today whenever there is an orange alert or any security measures taken, Sikhs have to rethink before stepping out from their homes to their jobs or schools as what would they do in case of a false branding because of their attire. The common man on the street would be well versed, if or she has a Sikh man or a woman with a turban (dastaar) serving in the New York City Agencies.

This bill is the voice of America and we the members of your constituents ask you to help us by delivering this bill. Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify.