

Recommendations for Law Enforcement When Interacting With Sikh Americans

Officer safety is paramount. These recommendations are for non-emergency and non-crisis situations only.

The following information and recommendations should assist you in respectfully interacting with the over 500,000 members of the Sikh American community.

Respect the turban, *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kirpan* (religious sword), and *Kara* (steel bracelet) as religiously mandated articles of faith that are fundamental to a Sikh's identity. These are religious items that are protected by the U.S. Constitution, Federal, and State law.

If you have a valid reason to confiscate any of the five articles of faith or the turban, handle them with respect and store them in a safe and clean place.

Turban

- Avoid indiscriminate touching of a Sikh's turban, head or hair.
- Avoid forcibly removing the turban of a Sikh.
- Removal or search of a turban is akin to a strip search.
- If a turban must be removed, explain the reason why the turban is required to be removed and have the Sikh remove the turban him or herself in a private place.
- If a turban must be removed, please provide a cloth head-covering to cover the head and the hair.

Kesh (Hair)

- Avoid attempting to forcibly cut, trim, or pull any part of a Sikh's hair or beard.

Kirpan (Religious Sword)

- It is important to note that NOT all Sikhs wear the Kirpan.
- Many Sikh Americans carry the Kirpan as part of their faith and courts across the country have upheld the right for Sikhs to wear the Kirpan.
- Sikhs do not consider the Kirpan as a weapon. The Kirpan signifies Sikhs' commitment to truth and justice; and is not intended to intimidate others.
- The Kirpan is worn in a sash over the shoulder and to the side of the waist. Some Sikhs wear the Kirpan over their clothing in public view.
- The Kirpan has a steel or wooden handle with a blade that may or may not be dull. It is kept in a wooden or steel sheath.
- A Kirpan is commonly three to six inches in length. However, since there is no prescribed length for the Kirpan, the size of the Kirpan varies by personal choice.

- Guidelines for wearing the Kirpan vary by state statute and municipal code.
- If you wish to know whether a Sikh is carrying a Kirpan, calmly and respectfully request the Sikh to show his or her Kirpan.
- If you must confiscate a Kirpan, explain the reason for taking the Kirpan, and handle the Kirpan with respect and care.

Kara (Steel Bracelet)

- The Kara is worn on the wrist.
- Avoid attempting to forcibly remove the Kara.
- Some Sikhs may have worn the Kara for several years and hence removing the Kara may not be possible.

Gurdwara (Sikh Place of Congregational Worship)

- Sikhs remove their shoes and cover their heads before entering the congregational hall and community kitchen. Cover your head with a piece of cloth and remove your shoes before entering a Gurdwara.
- Maintain respect for the religious items in the Gurdwara, especially the *Guru Granth Sahib* (the Sikh Holy Scripture).
- Tobacco or alcohol products of any kind are prohibited from the Gurdwara property.
- When visiting a Sikh place of worship be respectful of these Sikh sensibilities. Unless there are overriding safety and security concerns follow this protocol should you visit a Gurdwara.
- However, in circumstances where removal of shoes and covering of head is not possible, ask about another meeting location.

Language and Communication

- The native language of the majority of Sikhs is Punjabi.
- Some Sikh Americans may not be fluent in English.
- Please attempt to obtain translation services from the local community or SALDEF if a Sikh American suspect or victim is having difficulty communicating in English.

For additional information or to find out about SALDEF's Law Enforcement Partnership Program (LEPP), please contact SALDEF: 202-393-2700 / info@saldef.org / www.saldef.org

About SALDEF: SALDEF is a national non-profit civil rights and educational organization. SALDEF's mission is to create a fostering environment in the United States for future generations of Sikh Americans. SALDEF protects and promotes the civil rights of Sikh Americans through legal aid, advocacy and educational outreach.