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.

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