



UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

JAN 15 2014

PERSONNEL AND  
READINESS

Mr. Martin R. Castro  
United States Commission on Civil Rights  
1331 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20425

Dear Chairman Castro:

Thank you for your recent letter to the Secretary of Defense regarding concerns about Department of Defense uniform and appearance policy that affects Sikh and members of other religious faiths. Oversight of this policy falls under my purview, and I have been asked to respond.

You appropriately recognize the contribution of followers of the Sikh faith in the service of our great Nation and the Department's commitment to diversity. Rest assured, the Department is indebted to members of the Sikh community, both past and present, who have committed themselves to military service.

The Department's policies regarding uniform dress and appearance provide a means to instill the discipline and military esprit de corps necessary for success in a wide range of military exigencies. These policies reinforce that service to our Nation comes before self, and that everyone in the military is equal, regardless of background. These policies remind the men and women who abide by them that they have assumed special obligations inherent in the military's responsibility for the Nation's defense. Decades of experience with the All-Volunteer Force have proven such policies produce members who view themselves as a uniform group, larger than themselves, and capable of extraordinary achievements. Supreme Court cases echo the theme that the military is, by necessity, a specialized society separate from civilian society and that the military services must insist upon a respect for duty and discipline that is without counterpart in civilian life. The Department's policies regarding uniform dress and appearance, then, are based upon purely military concerns and not on religious beliefs.

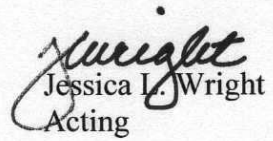
The Department recognizes that law and policy regarding appearance, and the wearing of religious apparel with the uniform may conflict with the religious beliefs of some members of the Sikh faith. This may also be said for a number of religious groups, and for persons with no traditional religious beliefs but with conscientious scruples regarding their appearance and dress. The Department's religious accommodation policies are designed to allow Service members to request exceptions to departmental rules that conflict with their religious beliefs.

At this time, the Department is updating religious accommodation policy to clarify the process for balancing the necessity of military service uniformity with accommodation of individual First Amendment rights. As a matter of professional military judgment, requests for

religious accommodation will continue to be addressed on a case-by-case basis and no blanket waivers will be granted.

Again, I want to thank you for your continued interest in the civil rights of all Americans.

Sincerely,

  
Jessica L. Wright  
Acting