PUBLIC JUSTICE
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PUBLIC JUSTICE SUES COMPANY FOR RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SIKH AMERICAN MAN SEEKING SHUTTLE DRIVER'S JOB AT INDIANAPOLIS AIRPORT

An Indianapolis man who practices the Sikh faith was denied a job because of his religious practices -- a violation of federal civil rights laws -- according to a federal lawsuit filed today by Public Justice and its co-counsel Kim Jeselskis.

Inderjit Singh

The complaint alleges that Air Serv Corporation, which provides services at airports around the country, denied employment to Inderjit Singh because he wears a turban and beard, as required by his Sikh religion.

Singh, a U.S. citizen, applied for a job with Air Serv as a shuttle bus driver at the Indianapolis International Airport and passed a drug test and background check, but the company refused to hire him even after Singh explained that his turban and beard are required by his religion.

"I just want to work and earn a living, but Air Serv refused to give me a chance even after they understood that a turban and beard are an integral part of my faith," said Inderjit Singh. "I don't want this to happen to anyone else, and I don't want my son to face discrimination in the future because of his own turban and beard."

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion with origins in South Asia that teaches honesty, compassion, humility, universal equality, and respect for all religions. Sikhs maintain uncut hair throughout their lives, and the turban is a mandated article of their religious faith. Although Sikhism is often confused with Islam, and Sikhs have been subjected to increased discrimination and violence since September 11, Sikhism and Islam are entirely unrelated religions. Approximately 500,000 Sikhs live in the United States.

"An investigation by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has already determined that there is a reason to believe that Air Serv violated the law," according to Victoria Ni, a Public Justice Staff Attorney representing Singh. "The company should make this right."

Public Justice's lawsuit, filed in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Indiana, alleges that Air Serv violated the law when it failed to make accommodations to its grooming policy to allow Singh to work for the company with a turban and beard.

"The company had a duty to make reasonable accommodations for Mr. Singh's sincerely held religious beliefs," explained Kim Jeselskis of Indianapolis, who also represents Singh. "Federal law is clear about this, and our client deserved better."

Air Serv is based in Atlanta, Georgia, but has offices at airports throughout the U.S. and the U.K. The company's website says that it has 8,000 employees and provides services to the world's

leading airlines.

Kavneet Singh, a board member and Managing Director of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the nation's oldest Sikh American civil rights and advocacy group, said his fellow adherents face ignorance and intolerance daily, especially since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, which unleashed a torrent of discrimination. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights reported a seven-fold increase in hate crimes against Sikhs, Muslims and Arabs in 2001.

"Air Serv is sending the worst possible message and there's no justification for it," said Kavneet Singh, who is not related to the plaintiff. "It is un-American for a company to force someone to choose between supporting their family and practicing their faith. We applaud Mr. Inderjit Singh for his courage in ensuring that his rights are protected."

In accordance with Sikhism, Singh, 51, has not cut his hair since birth, has covered his hair since he was a young boy and has worn a turban since he was 14 years old. Although he earned a college degree in his native India, Singh could not find white-collar work when he moved to the U.S. in 1997. He worked as a gas station attendant, toll collector and parking lot cashier in Virginia, where he, his wife, two children and elderly parents lived before moving to Indianapolis about three years ago.

Singh applied for the shuttle driver's job with Air Serv in late 2007. At that time, the position paid $9.90 an hour.

"My father is a hardworking American citizen who just wants to support his family," said T.J. Singh, Inderjit Singh's son and a student at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind. "Nothing about my dad's beard and turban would have interfered with being a shuttle bus driver."

To read the complaint filed today, go to
www.publicjustice.net/Repository/Files/Singh_complaint_120109.PDF

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Public Justice is America's public interest law firm, supported by - and calling on -- a nationwide network of more than 3,000 of the nation's top lawyers to pursue precedent-setting and socially significant litigation. It has a wide-ranging litigation docket in the areas of consumer rights, worker safety, civil rights and liberties, toxic torts, environmental protection, and access to the courts. Public Justice is the principal project of the Public Justice Foundation, a not-for-profit membership organization headquartered in Washington, DC, with a West Coast office in Oakland, California. The Public Justice web site address is www.publicjustice.net.