



NEWS RELEASE
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**DENIED JOB BECAUSE OF SIKH IDENTITY, BEARD AND TURBAN,
NORTH CAROLINA MAN SUES CONVENIENCE STORE CHAIN**

RALEIGH, NC – A North Carolina man who practices the Sikh faith was denied a job because of his religion and race – a violation of federal and state civil rights laws – according to a federal lawsuit filed today by Public Justice and its co-counsel, Winslow Wetsch, PLLC, and Debevoise & Plimpton LLP.

The complaint alleges that Durham-based M.M. Fowler, Inc., which owns and operates the Family Fare Convenience Store chain, denied employment to Surjit Singh Saund because he is a Sikh and wears a turban and beard, as required by the Sikh religion.

Saund, a U.S. citizen who has worked in other convenience stores for nearly eight years, applied for a store operator position with Fowler in early 2008. Saund was qualified for the position, but the company refused to hire him because of its alleged grooming policy, even after Saund explained that his turban and beard are required by his religion. The company told Saund that it would hire him, but only if he first removed his turban, cut his hair, and shaved his beard.

“I came from India to find a better life for me and my family in America, and I was looking for a better job,” said Saund. “M. M. Fowler wanted me to choose between a job and my religion. What they did was not right, and is not allowed in America.”

Sikhism is fifth largest religion in the world. It 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 as a head covering is a mandated article of their religious faith. Approximately 500,000 Sikhs live in the United States. About 1,000 Sikhs live in North Carolina.

“Nothing about Mr. Saund’s turban and beard would interfere with his ability to run the cash register and manage a convenience store,” said Victoria Ni of Oakland, CA, a Public Justice Senior Attorney representing Saund. “M. M. Fowler had a duty to try to accommodate Mr. Saund’s religious beliefs. It didn’t even try.”

Public Justice's lawsuit, filed in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina, alleges that Fowler violated civil rights laws when it refused to hire Saund and make accommodations to its alleged grooming policy to allow Saund to work for the company with a turban and beard.

Fowler has approximately 70 convenience stores, located throughout North Carolina, which offer gasoline at self-service fuel dispensers.

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. Although Sikhism is often confused with Islam, Sikhism and Islam are entirely unrelated religions.

"M.M. Fowler's actions are another example of the widespread and serious problem of workplace discrimination against Sikh Americans," said Mr. Singh. "Every day, Sikh Americans face employment discrimination, hate crimes, school bullying, and harassment due to misconceptions about the Sikh identity. Religious intolerance is un-American, and even at a time of economic crisis, we must make sure to not lose sight of the ideals that our country was founded on."

In accordance with Sikhism, Saund, 59, has not cut his hair since birth, and has covered his hair since he was a young boy. Although he earned a college degree in chemistry in his native India, Saund could not find white-collar work after he relocated to the U.S. Since 2002, he has worked in convenience stores in New York and North Carolina. He is permitted to wear an under-turban, called a patka, at his current job.

The case is Saund v. M. M. Fowler, Inc., filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina. To read the complaint filed today, [click here](#).

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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.

