

Family Fare sued by man claiming religion-based bias

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RALEIGH -- A Sikh has sued the Family Fare Convenience Stores in federal court alleging he was discriminated against when the chain declined to hire him because he has a beard and wears a turban.

Two years ago, Surjit Singh Saund, 59, of Raleigh, applied for a job at Family Fare, a North Carolina chain that owns gas station convenience stores. He had previously managed a Mobil gas station and convenience store for six years. The suit claims that during his job interview with Family Fare he was told he would not be hired unless he shaved his beard, cut his hair and took off his turban.

A Sikh born in India, Saund's religious beliefs forbid him to cut his hair. Sikhs believe hair is a gift of God and men tuck their hair in turbans.

Saund filed a complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which investigates employment discrimination complaints. After attempting to mediate the dispute between Saund and Family Fare failed, the EEOC gave Saund permission to sue, said Victoria Ni, a lawyer with Public Justice, a Washington-based organization representing him.

Family Fare did not return phone calls Wednesday seeking comment.

Title XII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

This is not the first time Sikhs have sued for discrimination. In 1999, the EEOC sued a Durham-based surgical-instrument manufacturer alleging it discriminated against an employee's faith when it insisted he trim his beard. In that case, an agreement signed between the parties required the manufacturer to pay the employee and his attorney.

The Sikh religion originated in India's Punjab region. There are an estimated 25 million adherents worldwide, and 1,000 Sikhs live in North Carolina, according to the lawsuit.