

**Public Safety and Security Committee
JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT**

Bill No.: SB-120

AN ACT ALLOWING POLICE OFFICERS TO WEAR RELIGIOUS HEAD

Title: COVERINGS AS PART OF A POLICE UNIFORM.

Vote Date: 3/18/2021

Vote Action: Joint Favorable

PH Date: 3/9/2021

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Public Safety and Security Committee

Co-Sponsors: Sen. Bob Duff, 25th Dist.

Sen. Catherine A. Osten, 19th Dist.

Sen. Gary A. Winfield, 10th Dist.

Rep. Anthony L. Nolan, 39th Dist.

Sen. Saud Anwar, 3rd Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

Despite constitutional provisions protecting the right of an individual to practice their religion, there exist constraints among police departments on the ability for officers to follow certain religious traditions like wearing religious headwear. Members of religious denominations like Sikhs whose religion require practitioners to wear a "dastarr" or turban are likewise barred from service in the CT police department. The Sikh constituency in particular has promoted this bill since it intends to protect the right of police officers to wear religious garb across all legitimate religions, therein enabling them to serve their communities. Further, in the states that have allowed for similar provisions, there has been no observed impact on the ability of officers to perform their duties.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

None Expressed

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Kelly McConney Moore, Interim Senior Policy Counsel, American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut

ACLU of CT supports this bill because they believe there is a significant need for legislative protection of religious liberties and that this bill addresses that need. The ACLU of CT cites that the issue of officers wearing religious garb is handled by the department on a case-by-case basis rather than legislative codification. Despite possessing the same constitutional liberties, individuals seeking to express such freedoms in form of hijabs and Sikhs are either prohibited blatantly or loosely protected in such ways that bias and discrimination could usurp the equal application of the aforementioned protections in the officer's service in U.S. police departments. In their research, they have found a prevalent history of discrimination and hate crimes against men who practice the Sikh tradition as they are misidentified as Muslim. On top of this, the organization cites discrimination and hate crimes exacted on women for wearing religious garments like the hijab in 2016.

It is the opinion of the ACLU of CT that government agencies ought to extend policies to minorities rather than force them to conform to societal norms.

Swaranjit Singh Khalsa, World Sikh Parliament

The World Sikh Parliament (WSK) supports this bill. They cite that Sikhism is the 5th largest organized, independent, and ethnic religion in the world. The WSK claims that Sikhs represent a constituency contributing to the socio-economic welfare and infrastructure of the state of Connecticut for over 50 years. In this light, the WSK feels that this bill improves the ability of Sikhs to contribute to the service of law enforcement. The WSK cites that Sikhs have been victimized and misrepresented within society as Muslim following 9/11. These victimizations are implied to also create a bias and discriminatory practices in affording Sikh officers the ability to wear their headwear while in uniform. In support of the measures of the bill, the WSK cites similar cases where such policies afforded to civil servants within the New York Police Department and within the U.S. military. It is the belief of the WSK that this bill will address some of the roots of societal barriers in accepting Sikhism and further enable departments to recruit individuals from various faith backgrounds.

Mohinder Singh Kalsi, Resident form Norwalk, CT

Mr. Kalsi supports this bill. As a practitioner of Sikhism, Mr. Kalsi states that wearing a turban is an essential part of the Sikh faith. He cites family members and notable actors within various fields of public service ranging from state office positions, doctors, and military members who have been allowed to practice their faith by wearing the turban in their duties. Despite these occupations affording respect to Sikhs, Mr. Kalsi states that the state of Connecticut has restricted turbaned Sikhs from service in the police force. Mr. Kalsi believes such restrictions are discriminatory and therein unjust. It is the belief of Mr. Kalsi that this bill affords needed religious protections to Sikhs in line with the unalienable rights granted to all Americans through the U.S. Constitution.

Maebel Haynes, Resident of Willimantic, CT

Ms. Haynes supports this bill. She believes that people should not have to be forced to decide between occupation and adhering to their religious beliefs.

Bob Duff, Senate Majority Leader of The Connecticut General Assembly

Sen. Bob Duff supports this bill. He believes that Connecticut has sought a more diverse and accepting state and thinks that this bill will further that agenda. Further, Sen. Duff believes

that officers should be allowed to serve their state without breaking their religious beliefs. He cites that the bill affords needed protections to officers following religious beliefs that also require certain headwear like Sikhism. In his testimony, Sen. Duff states that numerous police departments and the United States Military have adopted protective gestures similar to this bill regarding the public service that Sikh practitioners provide to the country.

Commission of Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO), CT

The CHRO supports this bill. The CHRO believes this bill improves the protection of civil liberties regarding religious traditions afforded to police officers. The CHRO believes that this bill provides expansive protections to not just police officers practicing Sikhism but also Judaism whose followers wear yarmulkes. In this, the CHRO cites that Sikhism is not the only religion that requires religious headwear and further claims that many religions mandate head coverings of some kind. The CHRO states that reasonable accommodation for religious practices is required by law. The CHRO further believes that the protections for police officers to wear religious garb poses no cost or otherwise undue hardship for employers.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None Expressed

Reported by: John Gerke, Intern

Date: 3/26/2021