

Sikh Coalition's Military Campaign: Frequently Asked Questions

*The Sikh Coalition values community questions and feedback on every advocacy issue that we engage on. In our effort to provide clarity and transparency in every area of our work, we want to directly answer some of the most frequently asked questions regarding our military campaign. **Please note that this information is not intended as legal advice. If you are in need of specific and immediate legal assistance, please [contact](https://www.sikhcoalition.org/legal-help) the Sikh Coalition directly at <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/legal-help>.***

1) What is the Sikh Coalition's Military Campaign? The Sikh Coalition seeks to end the ban against Sikhs serving in the military with their articles of faith (e.g. turbans, unshorn hair/beards). Beginning in 2009, the Sikh Coalition built and led a multiyear campaign that ultimately secured a landmark [2017 policy change in the U.S. Army](#) that dramatically reduced the barriers for Sikhs seeking religious accommodations and ensures that those accommodations, once secured, cannot be revoked (please note that [policy was revised in November 2018](#)). Today, more than 60 Sikh U.S. service members, [including at least 20 previous Sikh Coalition clients](#), are no longer faced with the false choice between practicing their faith and pursuing a career in the U.S. Army. This policy, however, still needs to be changed in the other branches of the U.S. military.

2) Why has the Sikh Coalition dedicated resources to this campaign? As a civil rights organization, the Sikh Coalition is committed to ending religious discrimination, including in the workplace. The military campaign aligns with this goal in that it aims to end religious discrimination against Sikhs by the nation's largest employer – the U.S. military. This campaign is a priority because if every branch of the military reverses its current policy, it will give Sikhs across the United States enormous precedent to practice their faith fearlessly while pursuing their chosen career path.

We believe that the right to work in the field of one's choice without compromising the practice of one's faith is a basic constitutional right. If we can clear this obstacle in the military, we will be able to point to the largest employer in America as a resounding example of religious liberty. The impact this change would have in other public and private sectors of employment would be enormous. We know Sikhs can serve with their articles of faith without impediment, and we want American employers – especially the largest employer in the country – to recognize this, too.

Our campaign to allow observant Sikhs to serve without forfeiting their religious practice is



modeled on anti-discrimination and equal opportunity campaigns lodged by women, African-Americans and the LGBTQ community. Women are breaking through barriers to equal opportunity in all career designations throughout the military, African-Americans successfully fought for desegregation of the military by race and color, and the LGBTQ community both repealed the discriminatory “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and continues to fight against the ban on transgender troops. In each of these examples, the advocacy effort was about the right to serve without discrimination – not a value judgment on whether individuals should serve. Our campaign is very similar. Today, we continue our efforts alongside other communities that are denied the right to serve, including observant Jews and Muslims as well as the transgender community.

3) Does the Sikh Coalition only pursue one-off accommodations for individuals? The Sikh Coalition works with a range of clients across multiple branches of service. These clients range from those who have been in the military for years to others who are just starting out, including clients at military academies like West Point. While the work to secure these individual religious accommodations is always done with the best interests of the individual client in mind, we are also focused on the broader goal of achieving policy changes, like the landmark 2017 victory in the U.S. Army, in every branch. By pushing for accommodations and policy changes in all branches of the U.S. military, Sikhs and other religious minorities will never have to make the false choice between their career and faith, signaling to employers across the country that our nation’s largest employer respects religious rights.

4) Does the Sikh Coalition value Sikhs who serve without turbans and unshorn hair? Yes, absolutely. The Sikh Coalition values every Sikh contribution across the spectrum of potential career choices. The reason why our focus is on Sikhs who want to serve with their articles of faith in tact is because that is the discriminatory ban against which we are fighting. Sikhs who serve in the military without turbans and beards currently have no employment discrimination obstacles to service. Nonetheless, we absolutely recognize and honor all Sikhs who serve in the military, and we believe that we must all work together to change hearts and minds on the issue of religious discrimination in the workplace and beyond.

5) What is the Sikh Coalition’s position on Sikh women in the military? The same discriminatory policies that prevent turbaned and bearded Sikh men from serving in the military also prevent turbaned Sikh women from serving. In this campaign, we are fighting for the right for both turbaned Sikh men and women to serve. Many Sikh women who do not wear turbans are able to



serve without issue and we value their contribution. Similarly, we support, encourage, and respect Sikh women choosing careers in any profession.

6) I see how excited the Sikhs who serve are, but I hear others criticizing the military. How does this affect your campaign? We hope everyone can find a path that they are inspired by. Military service, like many career choices, is a very personal one; naturally, our clients who wish to serve in the military are passionate about that choice. We recognize that every individual has his or her own perspective on military service. Organizationally, we do not have a value position on whether one should or shouldn't join the military or any other profession, and we respect each individual's right to make their own career choices. We represent military clients because we view this campaign as an effort to end employment discrimination by the nation's largest employer by advocating for both those individual clients and a full-scale policy change across all military branches that ends religious discrimination.

7) Who can I contact to get further information about the military campaign? To learn more, you can contact the Sikh Coalition's Legal Program at legal@sikhcoalition.org.

