My name is Cindy Nesbit, and I work as a senior staff attorney at the Sikh Coalition. The Sikh Coalition is a nonprofit and nonpartisan national community-based civil rights organization. Our goal is to work towards a world where Sikhs and other religious minorities in America are able to practice their faith freely, without bias and discrimination. Our team addresses issues of bias and discrimination on a daily basis.

We appreciate the city’s efforts to provide language access to immigrant communities. However, we do think it’s important to continue to expand those services so that people whose primary languages are less widely spoken are not left behind. These community members need to feel that they are part of the city that they call home.

Often times, though, these people are amongst the most vulnerable. For instance, members of the Sikh community predominantly speak Punjabi, a language that is not amongst the top 10 languages spoken in New York. However, because they wear an easily identifiable external uniform – unshorn hair and a turban – they are disproportionately targeted for bias-based incidents and discrimination. Without adequate access to resources in Punjabi, they are often unsure where to go for assistance and how to request the assistance they need.

Additionally, as the city continues to engage with immigrant communities, it is important to remember their cultures and traditions when planning events. The city should work with community organizations to learn what accommodations may be needed to assure that our diverse population feels welcome.

As an example, many people in the Sikh faith wear a turban and kirpan. For those who are unaware, a kirpan is a mandatory article of faith for observant Sikhs that resembles a knife. It is essential that when planning events, these articles of faith are taken into consideration, particularly for events in which attendees have to pass through a security screening. The city cannot expect Sikhs to attend events about their culture or that provide information that impacts their communities if they are unable to wear their articles of faith or are subjected to overly invasive scrutiny of their turbans.

Lastly, it is important for the city to engage with the NYPD and groups like the Taxi and Limousine Commission to make sure that these organizations are adequately interacting so they can effectively represent marginalized groups’ interests and address their concerns.

We appreciate your commitment to working with the diverse immigrant communities in the city and look forward to working with you to further your efforts to advance immigrants’ rights and participation.

Thank you.