

Sikh Community Impact Statement

COMMUNITY GROUP: Amrith Kaur, Legal Director of The Sikh Coalition

AREA: National Sikh Civil Rights Organization

DEFENDANT'S NAME: Andrew Ramsey

CASE NUMBER: 19CR-03328

JUDGE: The Honorable Lindsay R. Partridge

SENTENCING DATE: May 24, 2019

Dear Judge Partridge,

Thank you for allowing me to speak on behalf of the Sikh community in the matter of the People of the state of Oregon vs. Andrew Ramsey.

My name is Amrith Kaur, and I am the Legal Director for the Sikh Coalition. The Sikh Coalition is a community-based organization that defends civil rights and civil liberties in the United States, educates the broader community about Sikhs and diversity, promotes local community empowerment, and fosters civic engagement amongst Sikh Americans. The Sikh Coalition owes its existence in large part to the effort to combat uninformed discrimination against Sikh Americans after September 11, 2001. We were created by a group of students and young professionals who immediately recognized the negative impact the Sikh community would face because of the identifiable religious articles of faith. Since our inception, we have worked with governmental and private entities to provide cultural and religious competency training in assessing and investigating bias incidents that target the Sikh community. Along those lines, we counsel Sikhs who have been subjected to hate crimes, profiling and discrimination based on their faith.

In addition to being the Legal Director, I am also a member of the Sikh community. Sikhs' core beliefs include devotion to God, truthful living and social justice. Sikhs believe that God is loving and merciful, and has no enemies. We strive to be the same. Sikhs believe in the concept of "chardhi kala" – to maintain eternal optimism in the face of oppression. It is this faith and resilience that sustains us during difficult times.

Sikhs, who are recognizable by their unique religious appearance, including turbans and unshorn hair, first migrated to the United States in the late 1800s. Sikhs have been an integral part of the country's fabric for over 125 years — working as farm laborers, truck drivers, IT workers, doctors, lawyers, and everything in between. In spite



of our longstanding presence in this country, Sikhs have been disproportionately targeted for hate crimes.

The first recorded act of hate violence against Sikhs in this country was in 1907 in Bellingham, WA. Hundreds of members of the Asiatic Exclusion League attacked South Asian immigrants, most of whom were Sikhs working in local lumber mills. The first post-9/11 backlash fatality was a Sikh-American gas station owner named Balbir Singh Sodhi. He was shot by a man who, when arrested, called himself a patriot. At the time of his murder, Mr. Sodhi was placing American flags in the landscaping outside of his shop.

In 2012, Wade Michael Page, an active participant in the white supremacist movement, shot and killed 6 parishioners at a gurdwara – Sikh house of worship - in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in what was at that time the deadliest attack on any house of worship in the United States. In late 2018, the FBI released their 2017 hate crime statistics which show that there has been a 243% increase in hate crimes against Sikhs over the last 18 years. In fact, the 2017 data shows that hate crimes are rising to a point where we are now seeing the second highest increase in hate crimes against Sikhs since 2001. This tragic rise in hate crimes fails to take into account the many hundreds, if not thousands, more hate crimes perpetrated against Sikhs in this country who do not come forward to report them because of their fear of law enforcement, the shame of feeling victimized, or other reasons. Luckily, in this case, Mr. Dodd did.

Recently, we have seen an uptick in hate violence against Sikhs. In January we saw a Sikh taxi driver attacked with a hammer to his turban and face in Washington; earlier this month we saw a Sikh convenience store clerk shot and killed in Los Angeles; and in March we saw a Sikh taxi driver in NYC attacked and have his throat slit by a passenger who repeatedly asked him why he wore a turban and questions about his religious beliefs. In July 2018, a Sikh California man was attacked, beaten, and his turban pulled off before his attackers graffitied his truck with the words “You don’t belong here”. Other minority communities have also seen this uptick within the past year, including the Tree of Life Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh and Poway synagogue in California, which were both attacked by white supremacists, as well as the shooting death of two African-Americans at a Kroger in Kentucky. Additionally, there have been countless other threats and attacks on Sikhs, Muslims, and Jews via arson to mosques, bomb threats to Jewish community centers and schools based on their articles of faith.

Hate violence inflicts terror on entire communities and poses a fundamental threat to our democracy. The attack on Mr. Dodd, led to feelings of concern and fear amongst Sikhs throughout the nation – feelings which will never go away unless the attackers in these situations learn to quell their violence and educate themselves on religious diversity. The fear this attack and others produce led to an increase in gurdwara security measures; to parents being afraid to let their Sikh sons and daughters leave the house for social gatherings at restaurants or the other venues; and to the sad reality that organizations such as ours never have a shortage of work to be done. We look at incidents like this – where a Sikh’s religiously mandated unshorn hair and articles of faith, which represents a a gift from God – is blatantly attacked. We must resolve



ourselves as a community to remember the significance of our articles of faith and that those who attack us can do better.

A bias-based attack like this one does not happen in a vacuum. The underlying causes of hate violence are complex, and there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done to make our communities safe for all. Everyone must play a part. We need government leaders to condemn both bias-based violence and discriminatory policies, and allocate appropriate resources for combatting hate; we need law enforcement to identify, investigate and prosecute hate crimes as they did in this case; we need our media to not just shine a spotlight on hate violence and discrimination, but also showcase the multifaceted experiences of diverse communities; and we need to build inter-communal solidarity through education and outreach, through getting to know those who may be different from us.

To that end, we thank the Marion County Sheriff's Office and the Marion County District Attorney's office for their vigorous investigation and prosecution of this matter. We also thank the broader community in Oregon and across the country for their tremendous outpouring of support for Mr. Dodd and the Sikh community.

We ask Mr. Ramsey to take time and learn about people he perceives as different, and to work in service towards others. As Sikhs, we believe in universal brotherhood. This means that he, and all others who would rather use violence and hate than take the opportunity to get to know and interact with Sikhs and others who may appear different, are our brothers. We pray for Mr. Ramsey to find peace and healing, and one day see us as his brothers and sisters, too.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Amrith Kaur, Esq.
Legal Director
The Sikh Coalition

