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Sponsor Testimony

Senate Bill 24

Ohio House State and Local Government Committee

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Chair John, Vice-Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brennan, and Members of the House State and Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on Senate Bill 24, which upon enactment would designate April “Sikh Awareness Month.” Senate Bill 24 passed the Senate by a unanimous 33-0 vote in April.

I am a Christian – a follower of Jesus Christ and I am thankful that we still have the freedom in this country to worship publically – that is not the case in many other parts of this world. Many of our forefathers came to this continent fleeing religious persecution and woven into the constitutional fabric of our nation are the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, the ability to petition our government and freedom of religion. As Americans we must defend these constitutional rights for everyone – it is what makes our nation truly unique and free.

Several constituents in my district asked me to introduce a bill to bring awareness to a little known faith – Sikhism¹. Sikhism is a religion that originated in the Punjab region of India over 500 years ago. “Sikh” means “someone who learns” and “a disciple”. “The Sikh Coalition” gives a high-level summary of the basic tenets²:

- There is a single Creator who sustains people of all faiths, all of whom can practice freely
- Every human is equal in the eyes of God, and all positions of authority in Sikh religious and political life are open to both men and women
- Sikhism works towards the creation of a just society, and all Sikhs are required to contribute to the welfare of all of humanity

¹ <https://spectrumnews1.com/oh/columbus/news/2022/04/26/sikh-heritage-month>

² <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/The-Sikhs-Brochure-English.pdf>

- Sikhs must reject polytheism, idol worship, and superstition
- Sikhs have no clergy, and every Sikh is capable of experiencing the Creator
- Sikhism considers no place, day or time more holy than any other

Additionally, Sikhs are guided in their daily lives by three basic principles:

- Work hard and honestly
- Always share your bounty with others
- Remember God in everything you do

Over the years, a steadfast faith in these principles has helped many Sikhs to excel at home and in the workplace. The first Asian-American and first person of non-Abrahamic faith to serve in Congress was a Sikh, Congressman Dalip Singh Saund³. Nikki Haley, one of the first to announce her candidacy for President in 2024, was born Sikh⁴. While no single invention of his is as prolific in daily life as the lightbulb, Sikh scholar Dr. Gurtej Singh Sandhu has more patents than Thomas Edison⁵. While you are unlikely to run into a famous Sikh-American in everyday life, they can be found as your neighborhood small business owners, attorneys, first-responders, members of the military. Sikh Americans have pursued and continued to pursue diverse occupations and make rich contributions to the social, cultural, and economic vibrancy of the United States.

A more pressing need beyond awareness of Sikh contributions to society is in regards to how they are treated in modern America. Despite Sikhism being the fifth largest religion globally with over 25 million active practitioners, 500,000 of whom call the United States home, the Sikh people and their traditions are still often misunderstood. While the wearing of a turban and the carrying of a kirpan, or ceremonial sword, is a sign of honor, faith, and brotherhood for Sikh men, this tradition became looked upon with fear after 9/11 due to a lack of knowledge⁶. That Sikh man would lay down his life to protect a stranger, yet ignorance continues to be a breeding ground for further discrimination. Recent FBI data shows that despite a 12% decrease in reported hate crimes across the board over 2020-2021, anti-Sikh

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/12/19/breaking-barriers-congressman-dalip-singh-saund/>

⁴ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/nikki-haleys-south-asian-heritage-historic-part-presidential/story?id=97013821>

⁵ <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/aug/20/this-boise-scientist-has-more-patents-than-thomas-/>

⁶ <https://spectrumnews1.com/oh/columbus/news/2022/04/26/sikh-heritage-month>

hate crimes increased by 140%⁷⁸. This statistic is especially hurtful considering that when the Sikh people came here nearly 150 years ago from British India, they did so to escape discrimination and persecution.

This legislation is important to many of my constituents because Northeast Ohio has one of the densest Sikh populations in the Midwest. The 27th Senate District is home to two Gurdwaras (Sikh places of learning and worship), Gurdwara Guru Nanak Foundation in Richfield and Gurdwara Cleveland Ohio in Twinsburg, and another, the Guru Gobind Singh Sikh Society of Cleveland, is within a stone's throw. While these are separate physical locations, attendees can move freely between Gurdwaras and are welcomed as family just the same as they would be at their home location – visitors are welcomed just as warmly as well.

These Gurdwaras are not simply places of worship and learning for Sikhs, but also soup kitchens and homeless shelters and community centers for the larger and potentially non-Sikh population. Anyone off the street can enter and find a hot meal or a place to rest waiting for them. The meals shared with visitors are prepared in the same community kitchen, or “langar,” that prepares meals during the Sikhs' worship service. Meals are prepared in the langar by volunteers, joyfully assisting in the effort as part of their devotion to “seva,” or selfless service. Everyone physically capable – Sikhs and visitors alike – eat seated together on the floor to demonstrate unity and equality.

The passage of this legislation will ensure that Sikh-Americans countless contributions to civic life in Ohio and the United States are acknowledged and cherished, and that the Sikh community can continue to proudly be a part of the American story for many generations to come. It has been an honor to get to know the Sikh community within my district and a pleasure to share with you the values embodied by Sikhism.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.

⁷ <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/blog/2022/fbi-annual-report-shows-increase-in-anti-sikh-hate/>

⁸ <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/hate-crime>