

Winston & Strawn Partner Amandeep Sidhu Fights for Sikh Rights in the U.S. Marine Corps

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Winston & Strawn Partner Amandeep Sidhu leads the Firm's team representing four Sikh Americans who are suing the U.S. Marine Corps over restrictions "that effectively force them to choose between their career and their faith." Amandeep and the Winston team have worked side-by-side with pro bono client the Sikh Coalition for over a year hoping to avoid litigation but were left with no choice to protect their clients' religious rights. The litigation is co- led by the Sikh Coalition, Becket, and BakerHostetler.

"It really is unfortunate," Amandeep told ABC10. "Each of our clients is basically being asked to make a decision between whether they can continue to practice their faith as Sikhs or serve our country as Marines."

The suit—filed in a federal court in Washington, D.C., on April 11, 2022—alleges that the Marine Corps refuses to allow the men to wear their beards or turbans during boot camp or while deployed.

Removing hair from the body is considered just as taboo as adultery to Sikhs. Therefore, maintaining uncut hair, including facial hair, is an essential part of their faith. Turbans are also important, as they protect the hair and keep it clean.

The Marines argue that their strict grooming standards are in place to ensure uniformity and safety. However, exceptions have already been made. One of the men Winston represents cut his hair upon joining the corps in 2017 but was granted religious accommodation after being promoted in 2021. The exception allowed him to maintain his turban and beard, but only under special circumstances, rendering the accommodation meaningless.

In 2009-2010, Amandeep and the Sikh Coalition represented three Sikhs who were granted landmark individual accommodations allowing them to serve in the U.S. Army. After lawsuits in 2016 on behalf of four other individuals, the Army changed its policies to accommodate Sikhs and other religious minorities. Without the need for legal action, the Air Force also changed its policies in 2019. As a result of these changes spearheaded by Winston and our legal partners, over 100 observant Sikhs are currently serving in the Army and Air Force.

"Unfortunately, we're sort of at the same crossroads with the Marine Corps now that we were with the Army 13 years ago," Amandeep told Law360, "and despite every effort to avoid litigation, we're left with no choice but to do so in order to protect our clients."

“There’s this perception that you can pack up your Sikh faith in a suitcase and then pull it out after basic training and quite frankly, that’s just not the way it works,” Amandeep said in an interview with CNN. “That’s not the way the Sikh faith works. It’s not the way that the laws that apply to the Marine Corps work.”

Read the full [Law360 article here](#).

Read the full [CNN interview here](#).

Watch the full [ABC10 interview here](#).

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