

March 15, 2022

Honorable Senator Paul Pinsky
Chair, Senate Committee on Education, Health & Environment
Miller Senate Office Building, Room 2 West
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of SB951 Inclusive Athletic Attire Act

Dear Chair Pinsky and Education, Health & Environment Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony in support of SB951 entitled Inclusive Athletic Attire Act. My name is Sarabjeet Saluja Bhutani. I am a resident of Rockville, Maryland. I am a School Counselor with Montgomery County Public Schools. I am a practicing Sikh and the proud mother of a student-athlete.

My son and my husband both wear the Sikh article of faith, a turban. My husband, Kawaljit Bhutani, grew up in Baltimore in the 80's. He was the only turban-wearing Sikh at his school. Kawaljit attributes being an athlete to his experience of fitting in and not being regarded as simply 'the smart guy with the blue turban'. He says that sports broke down social barriers. Sports were (and continues to be) the great equalizer. Kawaljit was seen as the guy who could dunk. Sports were his gateway to friendship, belonging and a strong self-esteem that would set the tone for a successful adulthood.

Fast forward to today, my son Akaal has stayed mentally and physically strong because of his involvement in football, basketball and tennis. Knowing and playing sports is social currency for youth. In this day and age when bullying against faith minority youth is so prevalent, sports can and does unite. Our children should not have to choose between their article of faith or engaging in sports participation. Everybody should be able to embrace their faith while staying active and enjoying sports with their peers.

Bullying impacts mental health and leads to isolation, self injurious behaviors and even suicide. There is a growing epidemic of bullying and discrimination against Sikh and Muslim students. Half of Sikh kids experience bullying and harassment in schools, according to the Sikh Coalition. Sports serve as a beneficial outlet to off-set the stresses that adolescents are dealing with. The world is full of discrimination. It should not be when we speak of youth sports. There is no physical advantage to an athlete playing with a turban or hijab while on the court or field. Policies that prohibit wearing articles of faith while competing are outdated and discriminatory. All athletes should be able to practice their faith fearlessly.

My son Akaal has played and managed sports throughout highschool. He will be studying Sports Administration at University of Miami. Sports have been the center of his life, as is the case for many youth. I know that any parent reading this can understand the impact that sports can have on a child's self-esteem, leadership and wellness. In the name of inclusivity and unity, I am certain that the State of Maryland can combat discrimination for our faith-minority student-athletes.

I respectfully urge your vote in favor of SB951 Inclusive Athletic Attire Act. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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