



CREATING POSITIVE PERCEPTION OF SIKH IDENTITY IN THE U.S. PUBLIC

I want to thank UNITED SIKHS for inviting me to speak with you today about our work and the importance of maintaining open and regular communication with the Sikh Community.

A strong working relationship with you and your colleagues across the country is critical to the ability of CRS to fulfill its mission, and I hope that our discussion today will facilitate even stronger relationships.

Since 1965, CRS has provided experienced mediators to settle community conflicts and violence related to race, color, or national origin. CRS' highly skilled mediation professionals have helped resolve numerous conflicts involving excessive use of force incidents, hate crimes, marches and demonstrations, changing community demographics, and many other emotionally charged issues that affect our communities.

CRS provides its services when requested or when we believe peaceful community relations may be threatened. CRS conciliators identify the sources of violence or conflict and apply impartial mediation practices, crisis management, and violence reduction techniques to diffuse the situation and help local leaders resolve problems and restore stability.

CRS has no law enforcement authority and does not impose solutions, investigate, prosecute, or assign blame and fault. All CRS mediators are required by law to conduct their activities in confidence, without publicity, and are prohibited from disclosing confidential information.

CRS has ten regional and four field offices across the country staffed by a Regional Director and conciliators.

CRS works with tribal, state, and local officials, law enforcement officers, school officials and administrators, civil rights leaders, and community organizations. We also work with other DOJ components, such as the FBI or the Civil Rights Division, as well as our colleagues in other federal agencies. For example, we have provided cultural competency training on Arab, Muslim, and Sikh issues at the request of the Department of Homeland Security (DHW) to TSA officials at airports across the country.

In the aftermath of a police-involved shooting or an allegation of excessive use of force, the Civil Rights Division often asks CRS to meet with community members in anticipation of the announcement of whether or not a case will be prosecuted or a verdict in an existing case.

I. AMS ISSUES, PROGRAMS, AND TRAINING

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Community Relations Service (CRS) provided technical assistance and targeted training efforts towards establishing dialogue between government officials and Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities in the United States.

We developed the Arab, Muslim, and Sikh (AMS) Cultural Awareness Program for law enforcement officials, and have provided this training to well over 500 law enforcement departments and agencies across the country.

The Program brings law enforcement and government officials together with Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities to foster mutual understanding and enhance the capacity of law enforcement and governmental officials to effectively engage with these communities.

CRS conducts Train-the-Trainer programs, often in conjunction with the AMS Cultural Awareness Program, to train volunteers from the Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities. These volunteers then conduct trainings for law enforcement officials and first responders, providing them with an understanding of Arab, Muslim, and Sikh cultures that will enable them to more effectively work in these communities.

CRS provides training to law enforcement officials on racial profiling to identify best practices to prevent illegal discrimination against Arabs, Muslims, and Sikhs and to improve daily contact and strengthen mutual trust and effective policing practices in these communities.

CRS continues to respond to tension and conflicts related to allegations of disparate and discriminatory treatment faced by Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities across the country by offering conciliation and mediation services, as well as appropriate training programs for law enforcement, government officials, and members of the community.

CRS handles approximately 70 conciliations, mediations, or trainings per year involving Muslim, Arab, and Sikh communities.

II. AMS TRAINING AND TSA

CRS has worked with the Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and volunteer trainers from the Muslim, Sikh, and Arab communities to conduct cultural awareness and competency trainings for TSA officials across the country.

The training helps officials understand some of the cultural differences and similarities with members of the AMS community, and has allowed officials to adapt search policies to comply with some of these cultural differences.

Our conciliators stand ready to work with community members and TSA officials to provide trainings in an effort to address specific concerns that may cause unrest in the community.

III. IMPORTANCE OF BEING CULTURALLY SENSITIVE/AWARENESS OF SIKH ARTICLES OF FAITH – KIRPAN AND TURBAN.

At CRS, we recognize and appreciate the significance of the Sikh Turban and the Kirpan. Within CRS's cultural awareness and competency trainings, we coordinate with volunteers from the Sikh Community to instruct law enforcement officials to be respectful of these articles of faith when interacting with Sikhs.

We highlight the importance of this respect in a video that we produced called "On the Common Ground." The video clearly instructs law enforcement on cultural norms and advises them of best practices when interacting with the Sikh community. In our goal for continuous improvement, it is crucial that the Sikh Community continues to partner with CRS in our efforts to educate law enforcement, government agencies, and other entities regarding these issues.

IV. DIALOGUE/OUTREACH – HERE TO FACILITATE A DIALOGUE/ GETTING INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS

From my discussions with the Sikh community, I understand that concerns over employment discrimination, hate and bias crimes, school bullying of Sikh Students, racial and religious profiling at law enforcement agencies, airports and borders, and general misperceptions of Sikhs are all issues of vital importance.

Only through open and continuing dialogue with the Sikh community can CRS assist in addressing these issues by facilitating discussions with federal, state and local entities. To solve these issues, the Sikh community needs representation of its interests and an understanding of the dynamic of the policy and legislative processes.

As members of the Sikh Community increasingly become part of the policy-making process, their mere presence will influence the process to encompass greater understanding of not only the Sikh community, but all other diverse communities. And with that greater understanding of the Sikh Community, a more positive perception of the Sikh identity will emerge.

We are starting to see this process take effect, but there must be continuous efforts within the Sikh community to promote and persuade its generations to be involved in making their voices heard.

I truly believe that the Sikh Community has become an integral part of the American community. For example, the White House recently celebrated the birth anniversary of

Guru Nanak Sahib. Harpreet Singh spoke at the celebration, while President Obama congratulated the Sikh Community on this important occasion. In addition, the White House has met with the Sikh community and advocacy organizations this year to gain a greater understanding of Sikh civil rights issues within the United States.

V. FUTURE INITIATIVES AND CONCLUSION

Again, I would like to thank UNITED SIKHS for this opportunity to address you today. CRS is committed to maintaining a dialogue with the Sikh community and working to facilitate communication with federal, state, and local government entities to promote understanding of the Sikh faith. As the Director of CRS, I pledge to continue to do my part to meet CRS' honorable goals of ending conflicts based on race, color, and national origin. I welcome your thoughts and suggestions and look forward to working with your community leaders.