

February 17, 2022

Honorable Delegate Vanessa Atterbeary
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
House Office Building, Room 131
Annapolis, MD 21401

Testimony in SUPPORT of HB515 Inclusive Athletic Attire Act

Dear Chair Vanessa Atterbeary and House Ways and Means Committee Members:

I am here today to provide testimony in support of [HB515](#), which seeks to grant an exception to the National Federation of High School Association's uniform standards. Specifically, this bill will codify into state law the right for secondary school, community colleges and college and university athletes in public institutions to wear clothing or head coverings that are worn for religious reasons, including a hijab, Sikh patka, or long-sleeved bodysuit/legging undergarments for modesty, without requiring prior approval.

By way of background, the Sikh religion, founded in India, is the fifth-largest organized religion in the world, with over 500,000 followers in the United States. While Sikhs have been an integral part of the American fabric for over 125 years, they remain disproportionately targeted in cases of bigotry, bias, bullying, and backlash. Relative to other vulnerable minorities, Sikhs are disproportionately targeted for discrimination because they wear turbans and maintain unshorn hair (including facial hair) in accordance with their faith. According to a survey by the Sikh Coalition, 67% percent of turbaned Sikh children have experienced bullying, which is more than twice the national average.

Students may often wear a patka, a smaller version of a Sikh turban, which is usually worn by boys before they begin wearing a turban. The turban and patka are religious headcovers required by the Sikh faith that cannot be easily removed or reapplied due to their spiritual significance. A turban, patka, and hair should always be treated respectfully, as they are considered articles of faith that are fundamental to Sikh religious practice. Sikhs, like all other Americans, have the right to wear these articles of faith in school settings, including while playing sports. At both the collegiate and professional level, Sikhs have been allowed to play with their articles of faith. FIFA allows Sikhs to play with turbans, and Sikhs have played competitive basketball with their turbans in the NCAA (Darsh Preet Singh) and NBL Canada (Dipanjot Singh).

I have been an avid student-athlete my whole life, and have played a myriad of sports from basketball to football to soccer and more. For me and for many others, sports are a way to stay healthy, make friends, and be a part of the community.

My patka has never impacted my performance or anyone else's on the field or court. Most of my Sikh friends have also played sports their entire lives. I'm reminded of an incident where one of my friends was told that his patka violated league rules in a recreation basketball game. He was dumbfounded when he heard this because his patka had never been an issue for him or anyone else on the court. He was unable to play in that game and left feeling heartbroken.

Playing sports and practicing your faith, should not be mutually exclusive. For me, my passion for sports and my Sikh faith are both part of my identity. While the Maryland Public Secondary

Schools Athletic Association did issue a memo granting an exception to the National Federation of High School Association's uniform standards, I support HB515 in codifying religious uniform exceptions into state law so that no one is forced to choose between their passion for sports or practicing their faith. I respectfully urge your vote in favor of HB515 and thank you for your consideration.

Thank You,

Akaal Bhutani
abhutani@gprep.org