



Legislative Testimony  
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**Written Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 133, An Act Allowing Police Officers to Wear Religious Head Coverings as Part of a Police Uniform**

Senator Osten, Representative Horn, Ranking Members Champagne and Howard, and distinguished members of the Public Safety and Security Committee:

My name is Jess Zaccagnino, and I am the policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 133, An Act Allowing Police Officers to Wear Religious Head Coverings as Part of a Police Uniform.

We strongly encourage the committee to support Senate Bill 133. As an organization that strives to ensure Connecticut residents are fully able to exercise their constitutional right to freedom of religious expression, the ACLU-CT supports legislative efforts that clarify that religious freedoms are not subject to employer's preferences about employee's wardrobes. While explicit protection of this component of religious liberty is on the rise,<sup>1</sup> there is still a significant need for legislative protection. In 2016, only seven major U.S. police departments had policies that allowed, or seemed to allow, uniformed police employees to wear hijabs.<sup>2</sup> Another six explicitly prohibited police from wearing hijabs.<sup>3</sup> Most remaining departments deal with religious garb on a case-by-case basis,<sup>4</sup> leading to potential inconsistency or biased decision-making about who can exercise their constitutional liberty to engage in religious expression.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in 2016, the New York City Police Department finally conformed their departmental policies to the First Amendment when they permitted their Sikh officers to wear beards and turbans while in uniform. Ashley Southall, *Religious Police Officers in New York Will Be Able to Wear Beards and Turbans*, N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 28, 2016), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/28/nvregion/new-york-police-department-sikh-beard-turban-policy.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Casey Tolan, *These Are the American Cities Where Police Officers Can Wear Hijabs*, SPLINTER NEWS (Aug. 30, 2016), available at: <https://splinternews.com/these-are-the-american-cities-where-police-officers-can-1793861494>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

Protecting visible indicia of religious expression is more critical now than ever. Violence against Sikh men who wear turbans as part of their religious expression is disturbingly prevalent.<sup>5</sup> Women in hijab have been subjected to discrimination and violence for years, continuing through to today.<sup>6</sup> Jewish people are often targeted for wearing religious attire.<sup>7</sup> It is far more important for government agencies to enact policies that affirm religious minorities than for them to have rigidly uniform dress codes.

The ACLU-CT supports this effort to ensure that everyone in Connecticut, including police employees, has the freedom to engage in religious expression by wearing religious garb at their workplaces. Not only is this a constitutionally protected liberty—it is also good policy. Our communities deserve to have police forces that respect religions expression. We urge this Committee to support Senate Bill 133.

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<sup>5</sup> Niral Sharma, *Crimes Against Sikhs Continue in US Amidst Spotlight on Race Relations*, CNBCTV (June 25, 2020), available at: <https://www.cnbctv18.com/politics/crimes-against-sikhs-continue-in-us-amidst-spotlight-on-race-relations-6199811.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> *Fact Sheet: Discrimination Against Muslim Women*, ACLU, available at: <https://www.aclu.org/other/discrimination-against-muslim-women-fact-sheet>.

<sup>7</sup> Liam Stack, *Most Visible Jews' Fear Being Targets As Anti-Semitism Rises*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 17, 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/nyregion/hasidic-jewish-attacks.html>.