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Via Email and Facsimile

Governor Ted Kulongoski
160 State Capitol
900 Court Street
Salem, Oregon 97301-4047

Re: Deficiencies in the Oregon Workplace Religious Freedom Act (SB 786)

Dear Governor Kulongoski:

I am writing on behalf of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) to urge a veto of the Oregon Workplace Religious Freedom Act (SB 786).

Although SB 786 was, in most respects, a step in the right direction, it specifically exempts public school districts, education service districts, and public charter schools from its coverage and effectively rubber-stamps ORS § 342.650, which forbids individuals from wearing “any religious dress while engaged in the performance of duties as a teacher.” See ORS § 342.650. In effect, even if SB 786 is signed into law, observant Sikh Americans would still be barred from working as teachers in the public schools of Oregon because of their religiously-mandated *dastaars* (turbans), and observant Jews and Muslims would also be subjected to the ignominy of having to choose between religious freedom and a teaching career in the State of Oregon. This gaping hole in SB 786 constitutes a major step backward and simply cannot be reconciled with the spirit behind robust workplace religious freedom legislation.

Fundamentally, we believe that any endorsement of ORS § 342.650 would send the wrong message to Sikh Americans, who are routinely subjected to hate crimes and workplace discrimination for the simple act of privately adhering to their faith. An endorsement of ORS § 342.650 would also send dismissive signals to Sikh American children, who suffer bullying and harassment at schools throughout the nation. These are not theoretical concerns. In May 2008, a Sikh student in New Jersey had his turban set on fire by a bully. In June 2008, a Sikh student in New York was assaulted and injured by a bully who tried to forcibly remove his turban. Our collective efforts to teach children to respect and appreciate each other are undermined when regressive statutes such as ORS § 342.65 are endorsed in the name of religious freedom.

For the reasons set forth above, and with a view toward ensuring religious freedom for all people in the State of Oregon, we respectfully request that you veto SB 786, as proposed, and ask the Oregon legislature to approve a version of the bill that honestly and comprehensively protects religious freedom in the workplace.

Respectfully yours,

Rajdeep Singh Jolly
Director of Law and Policy
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