

Competency Guidelines: Sheltering & Mass Care for Sikhs

These guidelines are provided to inform cultural competency and reasonable religious accommodation mandates for U.S. Mass Care providers, and to assist staff and volunteers in competently meeting the needs of Sikhs during disaster response or recovery operations—whether at a government or private shelter, or a shelter in a Gurdwara (a Sikh temple) or any other house of worship.



In Mass Care registration or service settings, Sikhs may or may not choose to self-identify and, despite common assumptions, their outward dress or appearance may not identify them as Sikh. Moreover, ethnic or regional garb does not necessarily indicate religious observance. The Sikh faith originates from the Punjab region of Pakistan and India. For example, aside from the Sikh turban (*Dastar*) which some Sikh men (common) and women (less common) choose not to wear, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and members of other faith communities from South Asia may also wear the same (or similar) ethnic clothing. Although some Sikhs may feel comfortable raising concerns about their religious needs, others may not voice their concerns regarding any or all of the following issues.

SHELTERING

- **Greetings and Physical Interaction:** Upon entering a Mass Care setting, families and individuals who appear in a turban or Punjabi garb, or self-identify as Sikh, will feel most welcome if staff demonstrate a willingness to respect and meet their cultural and religious needs. These first impressions matter. Staff must also recognize greeting customs. Sikhs greet one another, and can be greeted by non-Sikhs with the Punjabi salutation—*Sat Sri Akal*: roughly translated as, "Blessed is the person who says 'God is Truth.'" Sikhs do exchange handshakes with, or embrace, people of the opposite gender.
- **Shelter Setting:** Due to culture and tradition—especially among recent Sikh immigrants, Sikh families and individuals will be most comfortable in sleeping settings where men are segregated from women and children. When a communal sleeping space is the only option, it is customary for Sikh men and women to remain fully clothed and take turns sleeping in order to watch over their resting family. A gender segregated sleeping space, divided into same-gender areas by a curtain or partition (acceptable), or separate rooms (preferable), is advised. Preadolescent Sikh children may accompany either parent or guardian, wherever they are most comfortable. However, where the family includes only an adult male and a preadolescent girl, shelter operators should attempt to allow the two to sleep in an area without women or adolescent boys.

PRAYER

- **Ritual Washing for Prayer:** Shelter operators and residents, should be made aware that Sikhs pray three to five times daily in every 24-hour period—up to three times in the morning, once in evening and once before sleeping at night. These daily prayers (*nicnam banis*), are taken from the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book) and are spoken in Gurmukhi, the Sikh language of prayer in which the Guru Granth Sahib is written. While Sikhs do not engage in a specific washing ritual for prayer, they are enjoined to wash their hands before entering a prayer space or handling scriptural texts out of respect. If possible, and for the comfort of all shelter residents, it is preferable to have one designated washing bathroom for men and one for women. If the bathroom space is limited, posted signs can alert residents of potential ritual use and indicate times this ritual use will take place. It is also appropriate to post signs that instruct all residents to keep the floor and sink areas dry, clean and safe. A wash basin or bowl can be provided in a chapel setting.
- **Preparing a Sikh Prayer Space:** Particularly at a time of disaster or crisis, prayer is important to all people of faith. Although Sikh prayers can be offered at any place and any time, a designated prayer space is preferable. Sikhs remove their shoes before entering a prayer room. It is customary for floors to be covered. In keeping with disaster chaplaincy best practices, a Mass Care chapel or prayer room should be established as a multi-faith space, without images or statues of any specific faith tradition. The area should be a quiet designated space with removable chairs, a plain table, and perhaps candles.

FEEDING

- Many Sikh follow both cultural and religious dietary practices written in the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book). Sikhs are forbidden from eating *halal* meat, kosher meat or alcohol and other intoxicants. All other foods are permissible, except those containing liquor or other intoxicants. Many Sikhs may be vegetarians out of cultural tradition or personal conviction, although such a prescription is not made by religious dietary law. Sikh Mass Care meals should include a vegetarian option. In addition, snacks should not contain gelatin, meat, meat byproducts, or lard.

MEDICAL, EMOTIONAL OR SPIRITUAL CARE

- When possible, religiously observant Sikhs may be more comfortable in seeking and/or receiving assistance from same-gender service providers. Some may have difficulties in communicating openly or forthrightly with those of the opposite gender. Medical treatment rooms and bed wards must be gender segregated by curtain or partition (acceptable), or separate rooms (preferable).

SIKH DRESS

- **Clothing:** Sikhs may dress in clothing that may fall outside of American/Western fashion norms. Although it is common for Sikh men to wear western clothing with a turban, older Sikhs and recent Sikh immigrants may wear ethnic or regional Punjabi garb. Baptized males (called *Amritdhali* or *Khalsa*) are required to wear a turban (*dastar*) - boys wear thin head covering (*patka*). Some may wear a long shirt (*kurta*) or pant set (*salvar-kameez*). Some males may wear their pant-legs slightly shorter than the standard fashion. Females may wear a head covering (*chunni*) (common) or a turban (less common) over their hair. Some may wear a long shirt and pant set (*salvar-kameez*) or a loose fitting wrapped dress (*sari*). Sikh dress does not indicate a person's level of education or reflect on a particular conservative (or liberal) religious or political orientation.
- **Headress:** The Sikh turban (*dastar*) is a crown of commitment and dedication to service all humanity. It is an article of faith that represents honor, self-respect, courage, spirituality, and piety. Observant Sikhs also wear the turban partly to cover their long, uncut hair (*kesh*). The turban is mostly identified with the Sikh males, although some Sikh women also wear turban. The Sikh faith regards gender equality as an important part of its teachings.
- **Articles of Faith:** The five articles of faith (*Panji Kakar*) are required to be worn by baptized Sikhs at all times. They are commonly called the "Five Ks," and are not just symbols, but articles of faith that collectively form the external identity and the devotee's commitment to the Sikh "way of life" (*rehni*). The Five Ks include *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kangha* (hair comb) *Kara* (steel bracelet), *Kachera* (cotton undergarments), and *Kirpan* (a strapped curved dagger/small sword). Shelter operators and security should be familiar with these articles, especially the Kirpan and recognize that it is required article of faith. Some Sikhs only wear a small replica Kirpan. Although not recommended, local authorities may require that all Kirpan be checked while in a shelter or secure area.

Sikhism

- Sikhism, the world's fifth largest religion, has an estimated 25 million adherents. Approximately 500,000 Sikhs live in the U.S. and worship at over 250 gurdwaras (temples). Sikhs do not have clergy. Founded just over 500 years ago, Sikhism preaches a message of devotion and remembrance of God at all times, truthful living, equality of humankind, social justice and denounces superstitions and blind rituals. Sikhism is based on the teachings of its ten Gurus enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book). Sikhs are the disciples of God who follow the Guru's writings and teachings. The word "Sikh" means "disciple" in the Punjabi language. The religion is called Sikhism. (Sikh is also an adjective; adherents are called Sikhs, pronounced "sic" or "seek.").

This Tip Sheet was written in collaboration with:
The Sikh Coalition, UNITED SIKHS, and the University of Southern California-Center for Religion and Civic Culture

