

SALDEF: Educating, Defending and Fostering Sikh Communities

SALDEF is a 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to “protect the civil rights of Sikh Americans and ensure a fostering environment in the United States for future generations.”¹ SALDEF started as an educational organization run by volunteers, but due to certain social issues in the aftermath of 9/11, SALDEF was transformed to assist the Sikh American community with various civil liberties, legislative, employment and accommodation issues.² SALDEF has a very wide scope of activities: from community outreach and education to legal defense of civil liberties for Sikhs, to legislative advocacy.

SALDEF as an organization has three primary functions. First, SALDEF offers legal assistance to Sikhs in workplace discrimination, denial of public accommodation and protection of articles of Sikh faith.³ Secondly, SALDEF works to educate the public on the history of the Sikh religion and people and on issues facing Sikhs in America today.⁴ Finally, SALDEF monitors the national media to ensure accuracy in reporting regarding Sikh Americans.⁵

SALDEF’s legal defense and advocacy programs aim to address significant problems Sikhs face in American society. SALDEF has a number of volunteer attorneys who work pro bono on individual cases, and SALDEF also collects reports of religious discrimination and works with and retains law firms to pursue litigation.⁶ SALDEF is also involved in legislative advocacy on the federal and local level by introducing and supporting legislation that addresses issues for Sikhs, including “hate crimes, bullying and harassment in schools, racial profiling,

¹ SALDEF, Mission, <http://www.saldef.org/about-us/mission/>.

² *Id.*

³ SALDEF, Legal Defense and Advocacy, <http://www.saldef.org/program-areas/legal-defense-advocacy/>.

⁴ SALDEF, Education, <http://www.saldef.org/program-areas/education/>.

⁵ SALDEF, Media relations, <http://www.saldef.org/program-areas/media-relations/>.

⁶ SALDEF, Legal Defense and Advocacy.

workplace discrimination, civil rights and immigration.”⁷ Through the legal defense and advocacy programs, SALDEF looks to help Sikhs who face discrimination.

The educational programs that SALDEF organizes and runs work to educate government agencies, law enforcement agencies, schools, and the general public on the history, identification and issues facing the Sikh community in America today. There are three major training programs offered by SALDEF. First are the law enforcement trainings, which are designed to educate law enforcement personnel on Sikh cultural heritage and to strengthen the relationships between law enforcement and the Sikh community in the post-9/11 world.⁸ Second is the Know Your Rights training, which SALDEF organizes and puts on as forums for discussion between law enforcement agencies, employment agencies, public school administrators and Sikh communities.⁹ Finally, SALDEF puts on youth outreach and anti-bullying programs.¹⁰

SALDEF’s media relations program monitors national news coverage and responds to and fosters discussion on stories written about Sikhs. The goals are to correct any misrepresentations and to foster the education of Sikhs and the greater American community. SALDEF is working, not to help assimilate Sikhs to “American culture,” but rather to educate the average American to Sikh history, heritage and the Sikh community that is growing in the United States. Fostering education through programs like integrating cultural awareness training into California peace officer training helps 60,000 officers understand challenges in the Sikh community better.¹¹ In addition, SALDEF joined with volunteers across the country to create

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ SALDEF, Media Relations.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Saldef, *60,000 California Officers Can Now Learn About Sikh Americans*, Nov. 8, 2012, <http://www.saldef.org/news/saldefs-sikh-american-awareness-training-becomes-part-of-californias-law-enforcement-curriculum/>.

SikhVOTE in 2012 to increase voting registration among Sikh Americans because registration was only 30 percent.