

Justice, Homeland Security departments get religion training: Understanding religious minorities

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The departments of Justice and Homeland Security have begun training employees to better understand and protect the civil liberties of American Muslims, Sikhs and other minority ethnic and religious groups in the long aftermath of September 11.

They also are attempting to involve Muslims and Sikhs in the “homeland security effort in a positive way,” said Daniel Sutherland, who was appointed as the first officer for civil rights and civil liberties at the Department of Homeland Security in 2003.

Both Muslim and Sikh Americans have dealt with increased prejudice, according to studies and crime reports, though Sikhs adhere to a monotheistic religion founded in India that is not associated with Islam. The discrimination ranges from the inconvenience of airport searches to the death of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a turban-wearing Sikh from India who was gunned down just days after the 9/11 attacks by a man who mistook him for a Muslim.

The Department of Homeland Security now holds regular forums in Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Washington and Buffalo, New York, to ensure that agency officials are meeting with people from Arab and Muslim communities. Local FBI officials and federal prosecutors often attend. Sutherland said the department tries to ensure that all its employees “understand how to work with American Arabs and American Muslims, as well as travelers from the Arab and Muslim world.”

Added Sutherland: “We’ve produced a couple of training products on that [topic], which you might call cultural competence training. We emphasize to our work force that we are not asking them to engage in something that is politically correct or what some people call sensitivity training; we’re just trying to give them the skills they need to do their jobs most effectively.”

The most recent release is a DVD called "Introduction to Arab American and Muslim American Cultures Course for DHS Personnel."

"Lastly, we're looking for ways to increase our employment of people with experience in the Arab-Muslim world or specialized language skills," Sutherland said.

The Justice Department has also used videos to train its staff. Last month it released "On Common Ground," a film for law enforcement officials intended to educate them about Sikhs and other South Asian Americans. Previously, the department released the video "The First Three to Five Seconds" to help law enforcement officials distinguish between a "threat" and a "cultural norm" when interacting with American Arab and Muslim communities. DHS also used the film to educate its employees.

Sutherland said that both the Justice Department and DHS need "to draw the communities into the homeland security effort and ask about recommendations on how we can do better. Our goal is to develop strategic partnerships with key parts of the American Arab and Muslim communities." *-Religion News Service*