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U.S. Sues Philly School District Over Beard-Length Rule.

The U.S. Department of Justice has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the School District of Philadelphia, claiming a rule regulating the length of employees' beards constitutes religious discrimination.

According to the suit filed Wednesday, the district in October 2010 instituted a new grooming policy preventing school police officers and security guards from having beards longer than a quarter of an inch.

School police officer Siddiq Abu-Bakr maintained an untrimmed beard for the 27 years he worked at the district, the suit states. Abu-Bakr is a member of the Islamic faith, which he says requires that he not cut his beard.

When Abu-Bakr notified his supervisor his religious beliefs precluded him from complying with the new policy, he was allegedly issued a written reprimand cautioning that continued violation of the rule would result in "further disciplinary action."

Though, according to the suit, Abu-Bakr provided district officials with a letter from his imam confirming his religion prohibited him from trimming his beard, the district allegedly responded his request was outweighed by "the integrity of the policy."

The lawsuit claims the district failed to consider Abu-Bakr's request for "reasonable accommodation" to its grooming policy. The district instead denied the request without showing that complying would cause undue hardship, according to the suit.

Prosecutors said Abu-Bakr filed a religious discrimination charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which referred the matter to the Justice Department after determining there was reasonable cause to support the allegation.

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