

Taco Bell Owner Sued by EEOC for Religious Discrimination

Article By:

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

Fayetteville Restaurant Unlawfully Fired Nazirite for His Refusal to Cut His Hair, Federal Agency Charges

RALEIGH, N.C. – Family Foods, Inc., a North Carolina corporation that operates a chain of Taco Bell restaurants in eastern North Carolina, violated federal law by **failing to accommodate an employee's religious beliefs** and by firing him because of his religion, the **U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)** charged in a lawsuit it filed today.

According to the EEOC's lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina, Western Division (***EEOC v. Family Foods, Inc. d/b/a Taco Bell***, Civil Action No. 5:11-cv-00394), Christopher Abbey is a practicing Nazirite who, in accordance with his religious beliefs, has not cut his hair since he was 15 years old. Abbey had worked at a Taco Bell restaurant owned by Family Foods in Fayetteville, N.C., since 2004. Sometime in April 2010, Family Foods informed Abbey, who was 25 at the time, that he had to cut his hair in order to comply with its grooming policy. When Abbey explained that he could not cut his hair because of his religion, the company told Abbey that unless he cut his hair, he could no longer continue to work at the restaurant.

Such alleged conduct violates **Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which requires employers to attempt to make reasonable accommodations to sincerely held religious beliefs of employees as long as doing so poses no undue hardship. In its suit, the EEOC seeks back pay, reinstatement, compensatory damages and punitive damages for Abbey, as well as injunctive relief. The EEOC filed suit after first attempting to reach a pre-litigation settlement through its conciliation process.

"Many decision makers seem to forget that they must work with an employee to agree upon a reasonable accommodation that will suit everyone's needs and rights," said Lynette A. Barnes, regional attorney for the EEOC's Charlotte District Office, which includes the EEOC's Raleigh Area Office, where the charge of discrimination was filed. "This case once again demonstrates the EEOC's commitment to fighting religious discrimination in the workplace."

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