



2015 CIVIL RIGHTS Report



CAIR
OKLAHOMA



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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

- 1** LETTER FROM CIVIL RIGHTS DIRECTOR
- 2** LETTER FROM CAIR-OK BOARD
- 3** ABOUT THE CIVIL RIGHTS DEPARTMENT
- 5** EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION
- 6** SCHOOL AND HIGHER EDUCATION
- 7** HATE INCIDENTS
- 8** REFERRAL SERVICES
- 9** MEDIATIONS & LEADERSHIP
- 10** KNOW YOUR RIGHTS SEMINARS
- 11** OUTREACH EFFORTS
- 12** FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

LETTER FROM CIVIL RIGHTS DIRECTOR



Assalamu Alaikum to my CAIR Oklahoma friends and family:

At the first anniversary of my time as your Staff Attorney and then Civil Rights Director, I am reflecting on a year filled with growth and learning. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the opportunity you have given me to become an advocate for your community and a friend to so many of you. This year's first ever Civil Rights Report is to benefit you, the community, and give you an up-close look at what we do in the Civil Rights Department. It's also my way of thanking you for your support and contributions that make our work possible.

In the past year, I have grown as a young lawyer through networking with other civil rights leaders and activists, reaffirming my professional commitment to equality and social justice. Close partnerships with a variety of other legal service providers have given me positive examples and a place to go with my questions and concerns. Through the many CAIR-OK events and programs that we have held, I have been able to discuss how my services can best reach the community, strengthening the growth of civil rights advocacy in our state.

I have also grown personally, expanding my knowledge of the Oklahoma Muslim community and of Islam as a world religion. As an ally to the Muslim community, I have been learning the ways I can best support my Muslim brothers and sisters both in and out of the office. It has been a wonderful journey and I am so fortunate to have these experiences as part of my working culture.

Building a career in the civil rights world has truly been an honor and a privilege, and serving CAIR Oklahoma as your Civil Rights Director is a pleasure I look forward to every day. Thank you so much for this opportunity to serve you and your community, and enjoy our first Civil Rights Report!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Veronica Laizure". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Veronica Laizure

LETTER FROM CAIR-OK BOARD



Assalamu Alaikum,

On behalf of the board of directors and staff of CAIR Oklahoma, we want to express our sincere gratitude for your support over the last 9 years that has allowed us to protect the civil liberties of Oklahoma Muslims. This work would not be possible without the generous support of the Oklahoma Muslim community, and for that we are appreciative.

It was in 2006 that members from the local community began meeting in Islamic Centers around the state and in their homes to make the dream of having a CAIR chapter in Oklahoma a reality. At that time it was hard to imagine that one day we would have staff that could take on the bulk of the work, let alone an attorney solely dedicated to protecting Oklahoma Muslims' civil rights.

After several brainstorming and planning sessions that began in 2013, the board of directors and CAIR-OK Executive Director Adam Soltani were finally able to announce a job opening for our first ever full-time staff attorney and civil rights director. Since joining us in November 2014, Veronica Laizure has shown her commitment to upholding civil liberties, enhancing the understanding of Islam, challenging Islamophobia, and promoting dialogue.

The release of our first Civil Rights Report serves an example of what our community can achieve when we come together with a focused vision, hard work, and support of community members. The accomplishments of CAIR-OK do not belong solely to the organization, but rather are a reflection of the Oklahoma Muslim community as a whole.

Sincerely,
CAIR-OK Board of Directors

ABOUT THE CIVIL RIGHTS DEPARTMENT

The Civil Rights Department constantly receives calls seeking legal aid or assistance. Some cases pose issues of discrimination or harassment against Oklahoma Muslims. Our first step is to ascertain if there is evidence of discrimination in the situation at hand. Through interviews, discussions, and reviewing documents, we determine if the case is appropriate for the Civil Rights Department to handle. From there, we provide help and representation for dozens of people and families fighting discrimination or civil rights violations.

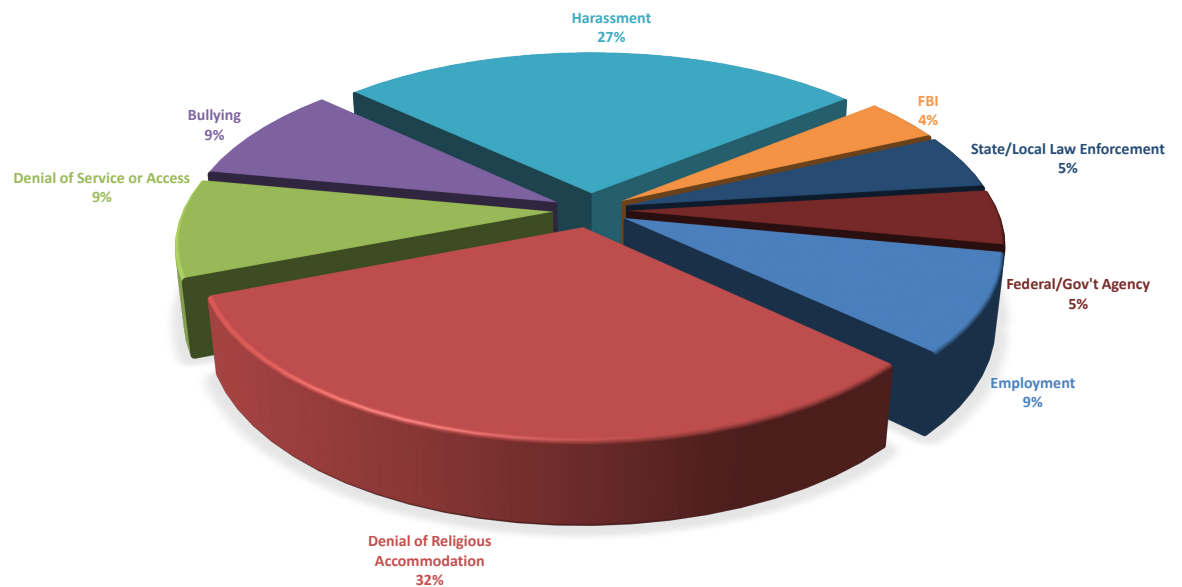
COMMON ISSUES HANDLED BY OUR DEPARTMENT:



- ✦ Employment
- ✦ Schools and Students
- ✦ Harassment, Bullying, & Hate Incidents
- ✦ Denial of Religious Accommodation
- ✦ Denial of Service or Access
- ✦ FBI Contact
- ✦ Law Enforcement

DISCRIMINATION CASES

Cases that include evidence of discrimination take a variety of forms. We sort cases into these categories to show patterns and common factors.



Where a case or issue is outside the scope of our work, we refer our clients to a network of other legal service providers and monitor the case as it progresses, providing support to clients navigating the legal system.

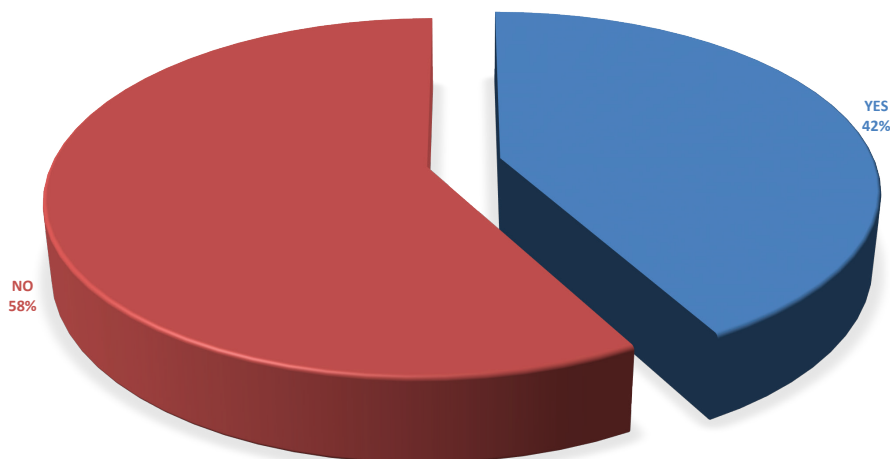
CASES REFERRED TO OTHER SERVICES:

- ✦ Family & Custody Disputes
- ✦ Immigration Law
- ✦ Non-Discriminatory Employment Law
- ✦ Criminal Representation
- ✦ Property & Landlord-Tenant Disputes

WE ALSO PROVIDE CONNECTIONS TO A VARIETY OF OTHER SERVICES:

- ✦ Mediation Sessions
- ✦ Mental Health
- ✦ State and Federal Support Programs
- ✦ Women and Children's Support Services

EVIDENCE OF DISCRIMINATION



Although about half of our cases do not show evidence of discrimination, we still spend time making sure that each client has access to the services they need.

EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION

Some of the most common situations that the CAIR-OK Civil Rights Department handles are workplace and employment issues. Unfortunately, Islamophobia and prejudice still affect American Muslims in the workplace. Approximately half of the discrimination-related cases that we handle focus on the need for religious accommodations in the workplace.

The most frequent complaints in employment cases are that employers are failing to provide reasonable accommodations for daily prayer, Friday prayer, or uniform exemptions. We also hear complaints that applicants for jobs feel they have been passed over or not hired because of their religion.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on religion, national origin, and race. This includes refusing to accommodate an employee's sincerely held religious beliefs or practices unless the accommodation would impose an undue hardship on the employer. A religious practice may be sincerely held by an individual even if newly adopted, not consistently observed, or different from the commonly followed tenets of the individual's religion.

Other situations that Muslims face in the workplace are cultures of harassment, bullying, and humiliation that takes place over a long period of time, creating a hostile work environment.

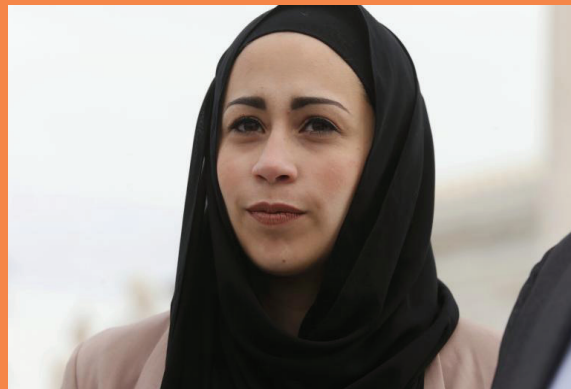
Harassment is defined as unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age, disability, or genetic information.

EEOC MEDIATION WITH CAIR-OK

Our client was hired through a temp agency to work at a manufacturing plant in Tulsa, OK. After performing his job without problems, when Ramadan approached, he requested a couple of small changes to his work environment. He asked to be moved to a building with better cooling and ventilation so that he would avoid heatstroke while fasting. However, his supervisor responded very negatively, and ultimately he was fired.

CAIR Oklahoma helped him report this to the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC). After it was investigated, we accompanied him to a mediation session and guided him through the process where he was awarded a settlement to make up for losing his job.

FROM TULSA TO THE SUPREME COURT



When Samantha Elauf applied to work at the popular clothing retailer Abercrombie Kids in Tulsa, OK, she excelled at her interview, but wasn't offered the job. She found out that although she did well, and was otherwise suited to work there, the regional manager recommended against hiring her because her hijab did not fit the store's "look policy." She reported to CAIR-OK, who then referred her to the EEOC.

After years of litigation, including supporting briefs filed by CAIR, Samantha's case went all the way to the Supreme Court, who considered the question of whether an employer could refuse to hire a potential employee because they knew that employee would require a religious accommodation. The Supreme Court ruled that Abercrombie had violated Title VII by failing to hire her because of her need for an exception to their "look policy" and set in place protections for job applicants who need religious accommodations at work.

SCHOOL AND HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the most important aspects of the CAIR-OK Civil Rights Department is supporting our young people through their education. Schooling, whether in private or public facilities, is a vital part of a young person's life. Our job is to make sure that every student has a safe, productive, and supportive learning environment in which to get the best education possible.



Unfortunately, we see cases where students struggle with the prejudice and ignorance of their peers, their classmates, and even their teachers. When we hear about these situations, we intervene and spread awareness and education, ensuring that the learning environment is protected for our Muslim children. We also conduct workshops with both Muslim youth and non-Muslim teachers and other service providers to make sure that everyone is protected from religious discrimination.

COALITION BUILDING AT OU

In early 2015, a video emerged of some students from the University of Oklahoma's Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) chapter singing a disturbing chant. The chant, which apparently was part of the fraternity's tradition, included references to lynching black men and repeated use of the n-word. After the video went viral, CAIR-OK and other community organizations released statements condemning the language in the video and calling for the university to respond.

OU President David Boren quickly stepped up to reiterate the university's commitment to diversity and tolerance on campus. The fraternity was disbanded and the two students responsible for leading the chant were expelled. OU also developed a diversity and inclusion training that all incoming freshmen are now required to take.

DIVERSITY TRAINING

A young student at a local elementary school and his mother, a hijabi, were harassed by a teacher while they had lunch together. They reported the harassment to CAIR-OK, who followed up by contacting the school and helping the mother file a civil rights complaint with the district.

Although the district's investigation did not find any specific wrongdoing at the school, the administration invited CAIR-OK to host a training session on the needs and rights of young Muslim students. Through our Diversity Training, we educated teachers on the particular needs of Muslim students and their families and helped facilitate cross-cultural understanding, optimizing the educational success of other young Muslims at that school.

HATE INCIDENTS

Although they are rare, hate incidents and vandalism occasionally touch the lives of Oklahoma's Muslim community. Islamophobic media, along with a lack of positive portrayals of Muslims, creates a culture of fear and distrust, which can sometimes result in dangerous, hurtful confrontations.

When these hate-fueled incidents or acts of vandalism occur, CAIR-OK works with the impacted party, local law enforcement, local media, and our interfaith and community partners to address the roots of Islamophobia, ensure that those responsible are brought to justice, and maintain the safety of our community.

RAMADAN ATTACK

During Ramadan, a local family was having their pre-dawn meal at a restaurant in Edmond. While they were eating, another restaurant patron approached their table and began screaming racial invectives and hateful slurs at them, threatening the women and young children as well. The family called the police, but the man and his companion drove off.

The family reported the incident to CAIR-OK, and we connected with local police to ensure that they had fulfilled their responsibilities. We also warned our community about the possibility of these encounters by releasing Action Alerts and other updates using input from local police and other law enforcement sources.

MUSLIM DAY AT THE CAPITOL

During our first ever Oklahoma Muslim Day at the Capitol in February 2015, we planned a day of lectures and panels with distinguished guests and local lawmakers, culminating in Friday prayers hosted in the Capitol's beautiful Rotunda. However, we were informed that a group of protestors were planning to host a rally outside the Capitol, targeting our own participants as they entered the building.

Despite this negative publicity, we worked with Capitol security and volunteers to ensure the safety of our participants. Our interfaith partners arrived in droves, outnumbering the protestors, and shielded our guests from the hateful invectives thrown at them. Capitol security responded quickly to our concerns, and we were joined by partners from all over the state. Overall, the day was a resounding success, and we were proud of our achievements that overshadowed the mean-spirited but small group of protestors.

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN PRESIDENTIAL RACE

As the 2016 presidential election season approached, various candidates began espousing Islamophobic statements or allowing their supporters to make some very dangerous anti-Muslim remarks. Concerned about the growth of Islamophobic sentiment in the presidential race, the Civil Rights Department, along with other interfaith and community organizations, held a press release. In the conference, we called on all political candidates to stop normalizing anti-Muslim fear and hatred, and to focus on the real issues they will face as potential Presidents of the United States.



REFERRAL SERVICES

Sometimes we find that a case is out of the scope of our mission, too costly, or too time-consuming for us to reasonably handle. In these rare situations, we are careful to refer our clients to other first rate service providers who can assist. We also monitor cases after the client has been referred and are always available to help our clients navigate their relationship with legal service providers. Nearly half of our time is spent on non-discrimination related cases where we keep our clients connected and informed about the services and legal processes that affect them.

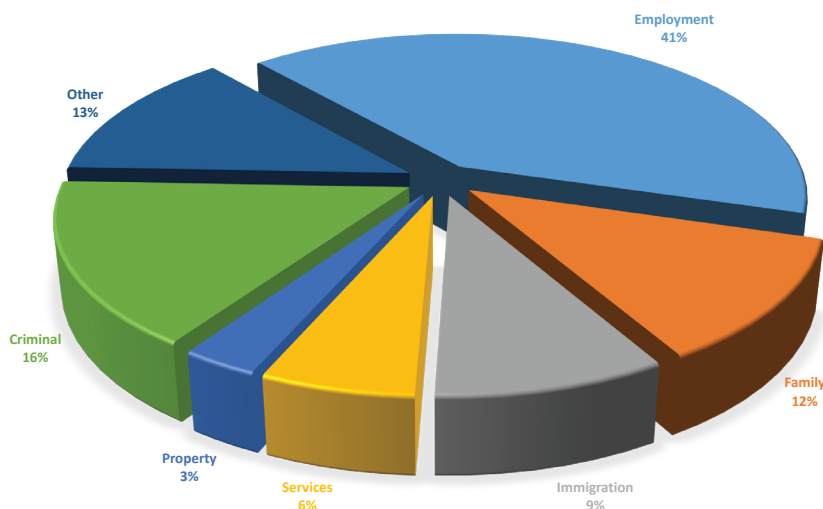
Through building strong partnerships, we can confidently refer our clients to a variety of legal service providers in the areas of immigration, family law, criminal law, property law, personal injury, and more.

TESTIMONIAL FROM YOUNES REBBAJ:



"I am international student on an F-1 Visa switching my immigration status to an H1-B Work VISA. Even with having my employer's attorney working on my immigration case, I contacted CAIR's Civil Rights Director Veronica Laizure a couple times to get some practical legal advice. Regardless of the complexity of the matter, Veronica was extremely knowledgeable and available and was always ready to answer any question I had during the process. Not only that, Veronica listened carefully to my questions and comments and responded quickly and clearly with analysis and advice aimed directly at my own case. Thank you so much CAIR for all your help and attention to resolving our problems. Your work is very appreciated. Keep it Up."

NON DISCRIMINATION CALLS



To serve our clients that utilize our referral services, we have developed a network of providers that we work with in a variety of different areas.

MEDIATION SERVICES

Occasionally, clients come to us with interpersonal conflicts that need to be resolved. Rather than solving the issue in court, which can be time-consuming, costly, and have high stakes, we offer free mediation services in select cases where a neutral third party can intervene between two people in conflict.

During the mediation, which happens in a safe, neutral space, both people have the opportunity to explain their positions and decide what, if anything, would satisfy them. This session has strict rules that enforce respect for each other and the mediator. This allows people to be honest about their feelings and state what might resolve the conflict, knowing their positions will be fully heard. We then help them compromise and settle the issue, finishing with a signed and legally binding contract. This helps both people to adhere to their agreement, and usually both people walk away feeling more satisfied than they would if they had taken the issue to court.

LEADERSHIP

The Civil Rights Department takes part in all our youth leadership programs like the Muslim Youth Leadership Symposium and the Oklahoma Muslim Gamechangers. We also let young people come to shadow our daily activities in and out of the office and get an idea of what civil rights advocacy looks like on the ground. Hosting workshops and presentations, we help to educate a future generation of activists, advocates, and community leaders who will be the new voice of the Oklahoma Muslim community.

LEGAL INTERNSHIPS

Our new Legal Internship program brings top students from local universities to work developing cases in the Civil Rights Department. From client intake onwards, interns are deeply involved in all the steps of client representation through resolution. They also have the opportunity to work in our many areas outside of legal services: government outreach, legislative tracking, community presentations, and more. Finally, they culminate their internship with a research project that examines a topic of their interest relevant to the Muslim community. Throughout the program, they develop vital skills that will help them in their future careers.




MIKAEL BRYANT, SUMMER 2015 LEGAL INTERN:

“My summer at CAIR Oklahoma had a profound impact on the development of my legal, professional, and personal life. My internship was structured in a way that gave me the opportunity to learn how to work independently, helping me develop skills to make me more of a self-starter, while allowing me to have focused guidance from Ms. Laizure which helped me better understand what it means to be a precise and ethical professional. I was also given the chance to exercise and develop my public speaking skills, having my first opportunity to host a professional banquet at the Summer Youth Symposium. Finally, my internship had a profound impact on the development of my personal growth as a human being, giving me the chance to learn about the perspectives of disenfranchised communities from a unique and vast spectrum. CAIR Oklahoma does amazing work and is such a valuable resource for Muslims and the community at large, and I will remember and value my time there for the rest of my life.”

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS SEMINARS

One of the most important services that the CAIR-OK Civil Rights Department provides is empowering the Oklahoma Muslim community to know their own rights and defend them when faced with discrimination. We conduct topic-specific Know Your Rights workshops that teach individuals what they can do or say in given situations, complete with examples and question and answer sessions.



Civil Rights Director delivers "Know Your Rights: Hijabi Edition" at Tulsa Peace Academy

SOME OF THE TOPICS WE COVERED IN 2015 INCLUDE:

- ✿ **Students Know Your Rights** - Your school's responsibility to you as a Muslim student or parent of a Muslim student
- ✿ **Girls and Women's Rights** - Focused on the rights of girls and women to wear hijab, but also covered other topics
- ✿ **Travel Rights** - In time for Hajj, discussed common issues while traveling and the various agencies or departments you might encounter throughout your journey
- ✿ **Law Enforcement** - What to do if you're stopped by police, how to protect your Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights, what to say to law enforcement officers

If you need to bring a KYR seminar to your community, simply email or call the Civil Rights Department to set up a workshop!

OUTREACH EFFORTS

The CAIR-OK Civil Rights Department brings educational presentations to those outside the Muslim community of Oklahoma in hopes of dispelling myths about Islam and reducing the Islamophobia spread by misinformation and ignorance.

In the one year that the CAIR-OK Civil Rights Department has been established, we have been invited to over a dozen non-Muslim organizations and events to speak on the reality of the Oklahoma Muslim community.

- ❁ **John Franklin Hope Symposium**, Tulsa, OK: *“Terrorists, Thugs, and Troubled Souls: The Narratives of Race and Crime.”* Explored differences in media presentation of perpetrators of crime, Islamophobic depictions of terrorists, and the consequences of skewed representation on the lives of American Muslims
- ❁ **St. Stephens Church**, Norman, OK: *“10 Things You Thought You Knew About Islam.”* Dispelling stereotypes and addressing common misconceptions about Islam and Muslim
- ❁ **Rotary Club of Oklahoma City**, Oklahoma City, OK: *“Islamophobia and the Media.”* Detailed examination of how the media skews perceptions of terrorists and terrorism, demonizes Muslims, and contributes to the discrimination faced by American Muslims
- ❁ **Sequoyah Elementary School**, Oklahoma City, OK: *“Eliminating Bias: Understanding Muslim Students and Families.”* In response to reports of harassment of Muslim family, presented an introduction to Islam and explored ways that teachers could support and empower their Muslim students and families
- ❁ **Comparative Religions Class**, Oklahoma City University, OK: *“Hate Speech vs. Freedom of Speech.”* Examined differences in legal treatment of hate speech in American Constitutional regime as compared to the European Court of Human Rights and the UNHCR

We also work closely with our partners at the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, the Oklahoma County Bar Association, the American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma, the YWCA of Oklahoma City, and countless other local and state-wide organizations that spread our messages of tolerance and pluralism in the civil rights world.





CAIR-OK Civil Rights Director judging mock debate at MYLS, Summer 2015

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

I think I have been discriminated against. What should I do?

Call CAIR to report the incident or fill out our Report an Incident form on our website. Then write down in a journal what happened, in as much detail as possible. Make a list of all witnesses and offending parties. If you are facing continuous or repeated discriminatory treatment, keep a log every time something happens. Keep all supporting evidence, including emails, voice messages, photographs, video footage, etc.

When should I report something to CAIR?

As soon as possible. Being treated differently because of your religious beliefs or practices is never okay. In fact, the more individual community members report the “smaller” cases to CAIR, the more we are collectively empowered to argue that there is a broader problem to be solved.

How much does it cost?

CAIR provides just about all of its services free of charge. To keep our Civil Rights Department running, we depend on the contributions of community members.

How long will it take to resolve my case?

We try to return all calls within 3-4 businessdays, but it may take up to 30 days to determine if we can take your case.

Will you share information about my case with the public?

CAIR adheres to the highest standards of confidentiality. In the event we see it beneficial to publicize your case, you will be consulted first. No information will be released without your consent.



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