

Dress code memo causes stir at Salvation Army

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
Monday, 29 July 2013 13:46



Officials with the Salvation Army said a memo that banned hairstyles such as cornrows and dreadlocks was posted in error, and such hairstyles are in fact allowed for its workers.

The memo, which was posted at the Salvation Army in Burnsville on July 2, addressed the Salvation Army's dress code policy in detail, including not allowing for hair styles such as cornrows, dreadlocks and mohawks. As a result of the posting, supervisors with the center confronted several workers at the facility and informed them they were out of code and needed to alter their styles of hair and were not to return until they did so. Reportedly, up to 10 employees were affected by the new policy. Eight were African-American and two were white. Of the group affected, one refused to alter his hair and was terminated.

But the problem was, according to Salvation Army Capt. Dennis Earnhart, who oversees the facility; the memo was not authorized and should have not been posted. Earnhart said the memo was originated out of the Salvation Army's human relations division in Des Plaines, Ill., and was intended to be a working document of suggestions and should not have been posted.

"Once the issue was brought to my attention I worked quickly to address the problem," said Earnhart, who said he also met with the Minnesota human rights commissioner as well as African-American community leaders. "The (Minnesota) Department of Human Rights is satisfied with our response and we had a really good meeting with community leaders. That's the real positive here."

Earnhart said that he and the Salvation Army have apologized to the workers who were sent home and that they were compensated for any time missed due to the erroneous policy. Earnhart said he could not comment on certain personnel matters, but, he said, if anyone was

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fired or quit over the incident, those employees would be welcome to return to work with no demerits regarding the incident placed in their personnel files.

Kenneth Kelton was one such worker fired due to the memo's posting. Kelton, who has not yet returned to work, said he has been offered to have his employment restored, but is fearful of retaliation.

"I loved my job there. I did everything, opening, closing, cleaning, cashier. What's crazy is just a few days before I was fired I was offered a promotion," said Kelton, who said he has worn dreadlocks for three years and had the style when the Salvation Army hired him in September of last year. "I'm one of the most well-groomed guys there. I want to go back – I need my job, but I just don't want to be singled out for speaking out. I don't know if I'll be comfortable there."

Kelton said though fired by a supervisor, it was done so reluctantly.

"It hurt to see my managers and assistant managers cry because they had to let me go," said Kelton, who also said managers tried to fight the posted policy.

Kelton said the inclusion of dreadlocks as being out of dress code was hurtful.

"It hurt to be discriminated against because of how you wear your hair – or really, because of how your hair grows."

If Kelton does return to the Salvation Army he said he is hopeful that the offer for promotion will remain.

According to Earnhart, the Salvation Army is the largest private caregiver for adults struggling with drug and alcohol dependency and his hope is the controversy would not detract from the organization's mission.

"Because we love God, it's our duty to help without any bias," said Earnhart.