



**U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission**

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**Press Release**

06-27-2024

# Houchens Food Group to Pay \$40,000 in EEOC Religious Discrimination Lawsuit

Federal Agency Charged Grocery Store Failed to Hire Applicant Because of Religion

INDIANAPOLIS – Houchens Food Group, a large owner and operator of retail grocery, convenience and hardware stores and quick service restaurants headquartered in Bowling Green, Kentucky, will pay \$40,000 and furnish other relief to settle a religious discrimination lawsuit.

According to the EEOC's lawsuit, Houchens subjected Matthew Barnett, a Spiritualist Rastafarian, to discrimination when it refused to hire him for a position at its Hometown IGA store in Williamsburg, Kentucky because he needed a religious accommodation to the company's personal appearance policy. Barnett's religious observance requires that he wear his hair in dreadlocks, a style prohibited under Houchens' personal appearance policy. When Barnett expressed his inability to cut his hair due to his religious beliefs, Houchens failed to consider an accommodation and denied him employment.

This alleged conduct violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination because of religion. The EEOC filed suit (EEOC v. Houchens Food Group, d/b/a Hometown IGA, Case No. 6:22-cv-00235-REW-HAI) in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Kentucky, London Division) after first attempting to reach

a pre-litigation settlement through the agency's conciliation process.

The parties resolved the lawsuit through a court-approved consent decree that, in addition to monetary relief to Mr. Barnett, includes a three-year injunction against future discrimination. The decree requires Houchens to take actions to prevent future violations of Title VII, such as training, notice posting, and policy revisions. Houchens will also report to the EEOC for three years to ensure compliance with the consent decree.

“An employer’s personal appearance policy does not change its obligation to try to accommodate the religious beliefs of its employees and applicants,” said Kenneth L. Bird, the EEOC’s regional attorney in Indianapolis. “This case is an important reminder that Title VII protects all sincerely held religious beliefs and applicants and employees alike.”

EEOC Trial Attorney Kathleen Bensberg added, “We are pleased that Mr. Barnett will be compensated for his harm with the knowledge that his experience will help prevent future discrimination. The EEOC is committed to ensuring that all people can succeed in the workplace based on their merit, not their religion.”

For more information on religious discrimination, please visit <https://www.eeoc.gov/religious-discrimination> (<https://www.eeoc.gov/religious-discrimination>).

The EEOC’s Indianapolis District Office has jurisdiction over Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, and parts of Ohio.

The EEOC prevents and remedies unlawful employment discrimination and advances equal opportunity for all. More information is available at [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov) (<http://www.eeoc.gov>). Stay connected with the latest EEOC news by subscribing to our [email updates](https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USEEOC/subscriber/new) (<https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USEEOC/subscriber/new>).

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**nearly-100000-eeoc-disability-discrimination-suit)**

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**Passages Family Support to Pay \$95,000 to Resolve Religious Discrimination Charge (https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/passages-family-support-pay-95000-resolve-religious-discrimination-charge)**

**Quest Diagnostics Settles EEOC Religious Discrimination Suit (https://www.eeoc.gov/newsroom/quest-diagnostics-settles-eeoc-religious-discrimination-suit)**