

Coalition hopes to bridge gaps between refugees, natives

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By Brian Mosely

A Nashville-based group is hoping to bridge the huge gap that exists between the native-born population of Bedford County and the recently arrived Somali refugee community.

Representatives of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) met with this reporter and T-G City Editor John Carney on Wednesday to discuss ways of opening communication with the newcomers.

The group is hoping to open a dialogue with members of the Somali community and get them organized so they can reach out to the rest of Bedford County, develop leadership and participate in the community more effectively.

TIRRC is made up of a coalition of immigrants, refugees and their American-based supporters who work to "improve the rights and the public's perception of Tennessee's rapidly growing foreign-born population."

Among participants in the meeting were David Lubell, director of TIRRC; Ahmed Dahir, civil liberties organizer for the group; Catalina Nieto, public awareness coordinator for TIRRC; Imam Haji Yousuf, the spiritual leader of the Somali Muslim community in Shelbyville; and Salaad A. Nur, outreach coordinator with the Somali Community Center of Nashville.

Lubell pointed out the problems that immigrants and refugees face, which includes a mutual fear -- one from the native-born residents of the newcomers and the fear the refugees have of a new country and society.

One of the hopes is that TIRRC can help the Somalis move beyond their former lives in the refugee camps and become better adjusted to western society.

While TIRRC has been helping refugees in the Nashville area, no such assistance has been given to the Somalis in Shelbyville. When this reporter began to research the story, a major roadblock encountered was the fact that no official contacts with the Somali community existed within the native population, nor were any advocacy groups representing them.

Lubell said that due to the civil war and horrid conditions the Somalis escaped from, they have a huge distrust of governments and the press.

This reporter also pointed out problems encountered due to this lack of communication. One county official actually contacted the T-G asking how to get in touch with the head of the Muslim mosque, since they had no prior contact with the Somali community.

Imam Yousuf thanked this reporter for the series, which raised awareness of the Somalis, and invited him for a return visit to the Shelbyville mosque. Nieto said that the series had also brought to light many of the feelings in the community about the Somalis.

"We want to help by integrating the communities, to make sure that both sides are represented," Nieto said.

TIRRC representatives said they want to bring about a change in the public dialogue about immigrants and refugees in Tennessee and have launched the Welcoming Tennessee Initiative, which seeks to increase understanding of "how new Tennesseans share our values, contribute to our economy, enhance our combined cultures and strengthen our communities."

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