

Nashville center strives to help Shelbyville Somalis

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By Brian Mosely

For the Somali Community Center of Nashville, Fridays are generally known as "Shelbyville Day."

That's when carloads of Somali refugees from Bedford County head to the city for assistance from the center, which provides social services and advocacy "to meet the needs of refugees and immigrants in a culturally sensitive manner," according to program coordinator Kerry Foley.

Salaad Nur, outreach coordinator, said there are an estimated 500 refugees or more living in Shelbyville at this time and that the center tries to provide services "the best we can."

Somali refugees in Tennessee were the focus of a program held at Middle Tennessee State University Thursday titled "Somali Immigrants in Middle Tennessee: Challenges and Opportunities," which was introduced by Dr. Jeremy Rich, who teaches African studies at MTSU.

The presentation was the final stage in a week-long series of events on Africa, and was co-sponsored by the Middle East Center.

"Our greatest effort in Shelbyville is to try to organize the community, because it's not going to be feasible to do everything for them (from Nashville)," Nur said.

He said the best option is to try to organize so the refugees could have a structure to try to work with Bedford County government to improve their relationship with the larger community.

"We can also see what kind of services they need, then try to advocate for that ... that is really where the effort is," Nur explained. Although many come to the center from Shelbyville, the center is unable to provide the same level of services as it does to refugees living in Nashville, because the Shelbyville Somalis only can come a couple of times per month.

"That has been a limitation, but we try to serve them as much as we can."

The only Somali organization currently in Bedford County is the Islamic mosque, and the center is looking at providing English classes at that location, depending on the resources they can obtain, Nur said.

"There are members of the mainstream community that are able to bring us these resources to the (Somali) community there."

Nur said instead of the center in Nashville providing a branch office in Shelbyville for the refugees, they wish for the Somali community here to take the lead.

"We don't want all the decisions coming from Nashville, and be imposed on them. If they are able to organize themselves and give them all the opportunities that we can give them, partner with them and ... guide them."

He recalled the early days of Nashville's Somali Community Center, when it couldn't pay the phone bill.

The community came together to make the center work, he said. He said he doesn't want the Shelbyville community to feel dependent on the Nashville center.

Nur explained that while the center was established in 2000, it did not really become an effective force for the Somalis until 2004.

Members of the center have also been meeting with different stakeholders in Bedford county, such as the sheriff's office, where an officer was provided recently for training to the Somali community on how to interact with police officials. There has also recently been a meeting with County Mayor Eugene Ray, although Nur did not participate in that gathering.

Talks are also ongoing with the Adult Learning Center on how to improve English classes in Bedford County.

"One thing about Shelbyville is that there are a lot of changes there," Nur explained. Many of the refugees arriving in Shelbyville are coming not from Nashville, but Columbus, Ohio, and they are people "that we're not real familiar with."

"We're trying to do the best we can but it's not something that's going to happen overnight. But as long as that community is there, someone will step up and bring these services on line."

Foley said that while the name of their organization seems centered on one nationality, immigrants from any country are welcome to come through their doors, but most of their clients are African. Virtually all the members of the center are bi- or multilingual, she added.

Foley asked the students to estimate how many Somalis were living in middle Tennessee and got answers ranging from 100 to 300. She said there are at least 5,000 Somali refugees in this part of the state, although they weren't sure of the exact number.

"Even at the Somali Community Center, we don't know how many there are," Foley explained. About 78 percent of the Somalis clients they serve that came to Tennessee are considered "secondary migrants," which means they have moved here from other parts of the U.S. and the center has no way to track them. Foley added that there are about 1,200 listed in their database.

The reason the refugees come to Tennessee are varied, but the primary reasons are the availability of jobs, cost of living, the climate and the presence of other Somalis who settled here first, Foley said.

There is also a sizable African population growing in middle Tennessee, including Sudanese (an estimated population of 7,000), Ethiopians, Burundians, Rwandans and other nationalities. Currently, a large number of refugees from Burundi are being resettled in Nashville, Foley said.

According to the center's figures, 70 percent of their clients are refugees; 12 percent are "asylees," who meet the definition of "refugee," but travel on their own to this country; 11 percent have become American citizens; six percent represent "other," many of whom have obtained a diversity lottery visa; and one percent may be T.P.S., which stands for temporary protective status, for people who are allowed to stay in America until the situation in their home country improves.

A total of 54 percent of the refugees are under the age of 30 and they typically have large families, up to eight children in some, with most coming to America within the last two or three years. The center generally does not see clients until they've been here for a year.

Foley said the majority of Somalis in middle Tennessee work for either Dell Computer or Tyson Foods poultry processing plants, with an average pay of \$9.58 an hour. Foley mentioned that the Somalis' Muslim faith forbids them from working in Tyson's pork processing plants.

Many Somali women take jobs as caregivers, some take up teaching positions and many are employed with Enterprise Car Rental or work in factories, Foley said. Many work second and third shift and will work "any job," Foley said.

Much of the money the Somalis make is sent back to their home country to their families, a practice that has been seen with the Hispanic community locally and nationwide.

Some of the Somalis are well educated, with some refugees being medical doctors, others that have earned Ph.D.s and other degrees, but a major problem these refugees face is they have no transcripts available of their overseas education since Somalia has no functioning government. Foley said that many want to work with the United Nations so they can return and help back home.

In Nashville, a variety of Somali restaurants have gone into business in the southern part of the city along Murfreesboro Pike, as well as clothing and grocery stores.

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