

## Refugee mental health services at risk

After loss of federal grant, Centerstone seeks ways to keep helping immigrants

By JANELL ROSS

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At first glance, the session looked a lot like any other Saturday afternoon seminar about family dynamics and coping with stress.

The faces of the mostly middle-aged men and women in the room were partially illuminated by the glow of a PowerPoint presentation projected onto a screen. Half-eaten cookies, bottled water and crumpled napkins cluttered the room.

But the questions pointed to something different.

"At home, the man is the head of the family, he provides, he creates the rules," said one Somali man in an English inflected with both his African roots and his new Tennessee home. "But here, the women, a lot of them, earn more than the men ... so things are not right in the house. How (do) you fix that?"

Last month's meeting at Centerstone's Southeast Nashville offices was part information session, part group therapy and a way to reach out to the more than 60,000 immigrants and refugees living in Davidson County. But on Dec. 31, a \$150,000 annual federal grant for the program came to an end. Centerstone is looking for ways to continue the work.

"We are a community mental health care provider," said Meryl Taylor, coordinator for refugee and immigrant services at Centerstone. "And we are fully committed to serving this entire community."

### Conflict breeds need

For most Americans, knowledge of the conflicts that create the world's refugees is limited to news stories. But for refugees who have fled conflict and been resettled by the United Nations and the U.S. government in communities such as Nashville, the jarring images and experiences are a part of their personal history.

The most reliable studies indicate that about 5 percent of refugees living in wealthy Western nations such as the United States suffer from severe depression, and 10 percent suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, said Dr. Michael Hollifield, a specialist in trauma, stress medicine and anxiety disorders at the University of Louisville.

"The fact that most don't wind up experiencing severe depression or PTSD is itself a definition of resilience," said Hollifield. "...It also points to the need for mental health screenings and services capable of recognizing, for instance, what depression looks like in a Ugandan refugee."

In 2002, Centerstone provided individual mental health services to 29 people. It seemed clear that more of the individuals arriving in Nashville from countries such as Somalia and Sudan may be in need of mental health services, said Richard Sapp, the refugee outreach specialist at Centerstone.

"In this country, there are people who are unwilling or afraid to admit that they are in pain, or do not recognize they are in need of help," said Sapp, now a full-time Centerstone counselor since the grant ended.

"So imagine what barriers exist when you have lived through a genocide, subsisted in a tent for years, you or your daughter have been raped, and in some cases (you are) unfamiliar with the very concept of mental health care."

## **The work continues**

Louisa Saratora, a program coordinator for Catholic Charities' refugee services program, said Centerstone was becoming a leader in providing services for foreign-language speakers. The agency made an important and valuable move when it developed the "therapeutic" community information session format, she said.

In 2004, Centerstone and the **Somali Community Center** were awarded a joint grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health. The two agencies created a program that they hoped might alter perceptions of mental health care in immigrant communities and ease the path to individual care for those in need.

The sessions started with just the sort of practical information that immigrants and refugees often need to navigate life in a new city, state, country and in some cases hemisphere, said Abdelghani Barre, immigrant services coordinator for Metro Social Services.

By 2006, the last year for which data are available, the number of immigrants and refugees receiving individual services at Centerstone reached 249.

Even without the grant, Centerstone dedicated funds to provide individual care to 20 immigrants and refugees free of charge. New slots become available as individuals qualify for public insurance plans, Taylor said.

For now, the group information sessions are over. The agency wants to do more and is exploring other funding options, Sapp said.

"We are health-care providers," Sapp said. "And where we sense there are needs, we certainly want to meet them any way we can."