

Tuesday, 07/31/07

## Somali center helps all types of immigrants

*Program gets grant to expand classes for English as second language*

By SUZANNE NORMAND BLACKWOOD  
Staff Writer

**PLUS PARK BOULEVARD** — When Sofia Hassan, 23, came to the U.S. six years ago, she faced many of the challenges refugees often face when they come here.

But after moving to Nashville a couple of years ago, she found the Somali Community Center of Nashville. There, she was able to take English and typing classes to help her prepare for life in the U.S.

"When I came here, anything I needed help (with), they helped me," the Somali refugee said. "They helped me a lot of times."

Sometimes, Hassan said, "My English is not enough." But, she added, "If I needed anything about the government, they called for me."

The Somali Community Center of Nashville, at 295 Plus Park Blvd., opened in 2000. It was among the first locally independent, nonprofit, ethnic community-based organizations in the area that was eligible for funding through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, said Carter Moody, the center's development director.

Once the center started receiving this funding, other funding sources followed, including private, state and local grants.

The center recently received a grant from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation to help it expand English as a Second Language program.

### Center draws from all around Midstate

Since joining the staff in 2003, Moody said he has seen tremendous growth in the center's success and role in the community.

"From a point of just getting our doors open to having a staff, stable funding and



enlarge

Omer Yassein helps Farhio Jimale, left, and Habiba Abdi with a workbook exercise in English class at the Somali Community Center. The goal of the language class is to help refugees learn enough English to navigate daily life in the United States and gain employment. (SHAUNA BITTLE / THE TENNESSEAN)



enlarge

Ayan Sateh sounds English words aloud while in a basic English class at the Somali Community Center in Nashville. (SHAUNA BITTLE / THE TENNESSEAN)



enlarge

Omer Yassein teaches English classes each weekend at the Somali Community Center. (SHAUNA BITTLE / THE TENNESSEAN)

national recognition is a good measure," he said.

Now, Moody said, the center not only serves Somali refugees, it also serves refugees from other African countries, Haiti, the Middle East and South Asia. Hispanic immigrants have even shown up asking for help, he said.

"People come here from Shelbyville, Tullahoma, Goodlettsville and other outlying areas," Moody said.

The center also has partnered with and supported other similar organizations, such as the Sudanese Community Association of Tennessee.

Moody said Somali refugees make up roughly 25 percent of refugees coming to the U.S. In Nashville, since 2003, they have made up at least 60 percent, he said.

### **Employment efforts help assimilation**

In the 1990s, the federal government designated Nashville as a hub for refugees.

"Various inland cities were determined to have affordable housing balanced with solid economies and a mature social service environment," Moody said.

A major challenge refugees face when coming to the U.S. is finding suitable employment, Moody said. Many of the Somali Community Center's services involve job preparation and placement and intervention in the workplace.

Abdirizak Hassan, the center's executive director, said the center educates employers about the religious and cultural practices of Somalis, most of whom are Muslim. The goal is to prevent misunderstandings and discrimination in the workplace, he said.

In cases of discrimination, the center has intervened in the past, Hassan said.

Tyson, Dell, Whirlpool and Goodwill Industries are some of the major employers that hire Somali refugees. Several temporary agencies and Cintas, a designer, manufacturer and implementer of corporate apparel programs, work closely with the center to recruit refugees for employment.

"Our current ORR-funded program helps refugees try to find the best work to match their skills and find educational opportunities," Moody said.

An added benefit is the cultural education they receive.

"The job place is the best place for refugees to acculturate and learn about this country," Moody said.



[enlarge](#)

**Hussein Hussein prepares for computer class at the Somali Community Center. In addition to English and computer classes, the center also offers legal, interpretive and mental health services, and serves as a cultural center for the refugees.** (SHAUNA BITTLE / THE TENNESSEAN)

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

The Somali Community Center of Nashville was profiled in a national study by the Migration Policy Institute called "Bridging Divides: The Role of Ethnic Community Based Organizations in Refugee Integration."

Contact Suzanne Normand Blackwood by telephone at 259-8268 or by e-mail at [sblackwood@tennessean.com](mailto:sblackwood@tennessean.com).

