

**Testimony by Abdirahman Mukhtar,
Youth Program Manager, Brian Coyle Center of Pillsbury United Communities**

**U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
March 11, 2009**

Mr. Chairman Lieberman, Ranking Member Collins, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The Somali youth issue is very important for me personally and professionally and I am honored to have a chance to share my experience and expertise about this issue.

My name is Abdirahman Mukhtar. I was born in Somalia. I fled Muqdisho, the capital city of Somalia, when the civil war started early January 1991 and went to a refugee camp in Liboa, Kenya. I stayed seven years in refugee camps and the capital city of Nairobi, Kenya. I moved to the United States in August of 1998. After moving to the United States, I attended and graduated from Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis and went on to pursue higher education from the University of Minnesota with a degree in Kinesiology. I am planning to go back to graduate school for doctorate of physical therapy in the near future. I have been working with youth for over eight years; first with the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Department, then with the Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota as a Youth Diversion Coordinator, and currently as the Youth Program Manager at the Brian Coyle Center.

The Brian Coyle Center serves as a central hub for resettlement assistance, social services, adult education, employment counseling, youth programming, recreation, and civic engagement for the Somali Community in the Minneapolis Metropolitan Area. The Center includes a gymnasium, community room, commercial kitchen, numerous classrooms, and food shelf and computer lab. Along with Pillsbury United Communities, other organizations that have their offices in the building include the Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota, Oromo Community of Minnesota, EMERGE Community Development, Somali Youth Network Council, Cedar Riverside Neighborhood Revitalization Program, the West Bank Community Coalition, Somali Education and Social Advocacy Services, East African Economic Development Center,

Haboon Magazine, and Somalia Family Advocacy Group. All are non-profit organizations.

ASSIMILATING TO THE MINNEAPOLIS COMMUNITY

The main difficulty I had assimilating to the mainstream community was the language barrier, because I did not speak fluently in English and at times people had difficulty understanding me. Second, I experienced racial and cultural misunderstandings; many people in society were not well educated and did not know much about my culture, religion and other differences. Many of the Somali youth and their parents have similar experiences such as limited formal education, caused by the Somali civil war and settlement in different refugee camps. Somali students like me were enrolled into classrooms in the United States based on age rather than academic level, making it very difficult to succeed. When classes are challenging beyond a person's current capability, it often leads to students skipping school and dropping out.

Since parents have to support their families and provide food and shelter, but can only get lower wage jobs (such as assembly work, cleaning, temporary jobs and some of them struggle with small businesses that barely make a sustainable income) they don't have the time to be involved in their children's academic and recreational activities. Not only are families working hard to meet the basic needs to support their children in the United States, they also are responsible for sending money to extended families back in Africa. The expectation of the school system on parents for parent involvement adds to the challenges for Somali families and students.

When I started high school, I was fortunate enough to have bilingual teachers to assist me in my education, and adaptation to the education system in America. Now, due to cutbacks and policies, Somali students don't have culturally appropriate programs and the support of bilingual teachers in their schools.

It was not easy for me to attend high school, because my family back home expected me to support them, even though I was in my teens. I was encouraged to get a GED instead

of finishing high school, so I could get a full-time job. Instead, I started working 20 hours a week at the Mall of America and continued to work towards my high school diploma. During the summer, I worked full time while also attending summer school to pass the basic standards tests in Math and English. In my senior year, I took a commanding English class at the University of Minnesota in order to improve and be ready for college. I was able to take this class through the post-secondary options program. Because of my GPA, leadership and extracurricular activities, I was accepted to attend the General College of the University of Minnesota, which no longer exists.

SOMALI YOUTH TODAY

Somali youth today experience the same barriers I faced as a new immigrant in the United States, however they do so with even less resources than what was available for me. Language is still a barrier as young Somalis try to achieve success. Identity crisis and cultural conflict are a reality for Somali youth (For example: Somali culture at home vs. American system at school). Parents expect you to keep your culture, while the American education system and way of life forces you to assimilate. Many have difficulties adjusting to the new way of life while facing cultural barriers that seem hard to overcome. As a result of identity crisis and frequent challenges, many youth lose hope and start making poor choices. The current economic situation also adds to the problem, since jobs are not available for youth. They become truant; getting involved in gangs and using drugs like their peers. However, there are many successful Somali youth who overcame these obstacles.

Somali families tend to be large, mostly with single parents who are working to make ends meet. Many Somali parents also provide for relatives thus reducing their income status and livelihood. Even though parents care deeply for their children, this continues to be a strain on the support provided to Somali youth.

Somali families for the most part live in high density housing in the lowest income neighborhoods in the City. The Cedar Riverside neighborhood where I live and work has a median household income of just \$14,367 a year. The unemployment rate is 17 percent

according to the 2000 census, so it is much worse especially the economic crisis we are facing. Across the street from the Brian Coyle Center in one apartment complex there are 3,500 residents, of which 92% are immigrants and 1,190 are under age 18.

This is the highest concentration of low-income children in Minnesota and most of them are Somalis. Many opportunities/resources are not available in neighborhoods that Somali's reside compared to other areas in the city. Services are often inaccessible due to lack of appropriate local, city and state agencies offering culturally competent services to Somalis. We operate our programs in a city-owned building for which the park department doesn't even cover the expenses they're required to by contract, so we manage with minimal resources.

When youth don't have access to healthy options to fill their free time, they fall into the typical trappings associated with youth culture, i.e. the internet (peer pressure and cyber predators). Many Somali youth are nowadays involved with drug use and gang violence- this seems to be the biggest distraction because resources and many important opportunities are not available.

People without college degrees are limited with regards to employment. They are reduced to manual labor and factory work. Moreover, racism and employment discrimination still exist in many blue-collar establishments. This leads to problems such as high divorce rates and child neglect, because they are unable to provide for their families and other family members.

Somali youth report a high level of discrimination and prejudice across the board. This includes schools, colleges, the media, in the community and by law enforcement. Discrimination is based on ethnicity, culture and religion. When I asked a group of youth ranging in ages 10 to 20 what were their greatest challenges, 50% answered harassment by the police. Because of how young Somali Americans dress, even some of their own community members stereotypes.

Second generation immigrants differ. Like many immigrant communities, there is a stark difference between first and second-generation Somali immigrants. Parents maintain a lifestyle that essentially is like living from a suitcase, they hope to return. They experience language barriers and have difficulty interacting with the larger society. Second-generation Somalis are more settled and hope to build their lives here, they are more immersed in American culture and they are fully engaged.

Somali immigrants experience frustration with the education system, and new sets of barriers occur for second-generation immigrants. Institutions often aren't empowering, for example keeping students in ELL even if they don't need such courses. Second generation Somali youth often speak English well, but are stereotyped and wrongly assigned to low level classes. Inner city schools still have a graduation rate for Somali students well below their white American peers. Second generation Somalis consider themselves Somali Americans, but they experience stereotyping by the broader society who sees only their ethnicity and religious affiliation.

SHIRWA AHMED STORY

Shirwa Ahmed and I went to Roosevelt High School together and we are both from Somalia. Recently, it was reported that Shirwa was the first American citizen known to be a suicide bomber.

The Somali community is not a monolithic community, it's highly diverse. As a first-generation immigrant, I faced many challenges in my life, and I had many responsibilities with regards to supporting my life. I made decisions that reflect my history and experiences. It's difficult to map out the lives of people. Many of my classmates took different paths in life and ended up in different roles, some are highly trained professionals, some are in jail, and some are in the workforce earning low wages.

When learning about Shirwa's role as a suicide bomber, people were shocked and angry, because it goes against the Somali culture and it is also inherently anti-Islamic. Many

Somalis are not convinced that it happened because the idea seems too far out of people's comprehension. Throughout Somali's history, particularly in times of war, suicide bombings never occurred.

I have been asked; do Somali youth talk about Shirwa? Somali youth talk more about March Madness, Kobe Bryant, and the NFL draft more than they do about Shirwa...many do not know much about him and are not interested in the whole issue, because they believe that it is not a good thing and they deal with greater local challenges that they face in their daily life's.

Adults have expressed concern about the potential threat of terrorist recruiters working in Minneapolis. To my knowledge, I have not come across any recruiters, but rumors exist whether they are true or false. The only recruiters I heard of in my line of work are gang recruiters. Somali youth are more susceptible to gangs than anything else, given the fact they are promoted by mainstream hip-hop culture and are known for recruiting at-risk or vulnerable youth.

Role of You-tube and other online sites: Youth are very tech savvy these days and the Internet is where young people of a wide range of interests come together. Young people are inclined to participate in Internet activities. Hollywood and contemporary American pop culture glorify violence. So when al shabaab's video of an execution surfaced, people began comparing this act to images perpetuated by Hollywood. Young people often refer to outrageous acts of violence as "gangster," regardless of whether or not they condone that type of behavior. More needs to be done about the access youth have to violence on the internet and on television and more conversations with youth need to occur in order help them process what they are seeing.

SOLUTIONS TO THE ISSUES

Problems that Somalis face are similar to other marginalized community experiences. Somalis need better schools, access to adequate housing, access to adequate health, and a slew of other social solutions. Somalis face unique challenges, like language barriers that

may prevent these services from getting to the right people; but they are no different than many other underserved populations. Greater outreach and engagement with the mosques to address a wide range of community issues is essential. Islam is the common denominator among Somalis, and this is important since our community is torn by tribalism. Mosques are considered a safe venue, and they have been able to help at-risk youth more effectively than any other civil or state organizations. Also, the Brian Coyle Center as a hub for the Somali community and interaction with the broader community is an essential partner in any efforts to reduce youth violence. It's important to empower disenfranchised youth and provide an alternative to violent routes. This requires creating a platform so that schools, families and community centers can work together.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A local coordinating committee could oversee the full design and implementation of a comprehensive plan to prevent violent extremism, including nonprofit leaders, Mosque leaders and law enforcement.

In order to decrease the barriers and isolation experienced by Somali immigrants, we need to improve community engagement and acculturation. This includes paying more attention to identifying and mitigating issues experienced by Somalis in American culture, such as race and religious discrimination, identity crisis, barriers to economic and family stability, barriers to school success, mental and physical health needs, and social isolation. We can expand community and civic participation. We can bridge cultural knowledge and understanding between Muslim and Non-Muslim communities through open dialogue. Partnering with Mosques in creating anti-violence messages and education that can be incorporated into programs working with Somali youth and students is important.

Second, a proactive strategy to lessen the use of the Internet in promoting violent acts is needed. Tracking and seriously responding to violent extremism available on web sites is a priority. An example would be Al Shabaab's online video of an execution – should be taken off line. We can diversify information available on the web to include counter-

violent extremism messages and information. At the Brian Coyle Center, we closely monitor and block access to websites when we see they are being used by youth for harmful purposes, even if it's You Tube and My Space. Any locations where youth are the primary users of computers should be strictly monitored.

Last, prevention of violent radicalization is the highest priority. We can create curriculum and tools to educate people to detect risks and signals of radicalization. Education can be provided to parents, social services, and school staff, students, mosques and law enforcement. Use of the Somali community media networks will be more productive than using mainstream media. We also need to educate law enforcement, including the FBI, about tactics that create more misunderstanding rather than help prevent, respond to, or solve problems. We can provide a central location where the community feels safe in confidentially reporting any concerns they have about specific people or safety related issues that need follow up. We can develop a skilled team of interveners to assist at-risk individuals in rejecting violent methods, and coordinate with law enforcement. This includes youth diversion programming and the use of culturally specific restorative justice circles.

CONCLUSION

To successfully implement a comprehensive plan, the Somali American community encourages federal, state and local government, including law enforcement personnel, to work in partnership with community stakeholders. Progress is difficult when a mentality of “guilt by association” is the overriding factor in communication with Somali Americans. The Somali American community should be educated about their rights and responsibilities. The local community has the expertise and capacity to carry out a comprehensive plan and what we need most from all levels of government is true partnership and resources to make it happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today, I am happy to answer any questions you may have.