
THE SOMALI COMMUNITY IN BARRON, WISCONSIN, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

**A Report of the Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the
United States Commission on Civil Rights**

December 2012

The State Advisory Committees to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

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State Advisory Committee Reports

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Letter of Transmittal

Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

To the *Staff Director*

The Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights submits this report, *The Somali Community in Barron, Wisconsin, and the American Dream*, as part of its responsibility to examine and report on civil rights issues in Wisconsin under the jurisdiction of the Commission. This report follows a community forum on the issue in September 2011. The report was adopted by a vote of 13 to 0.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Adel Mekraz", written in a cursive style.

Adel Mekraz, *Chair*
Wisconsin State Advisory Committee

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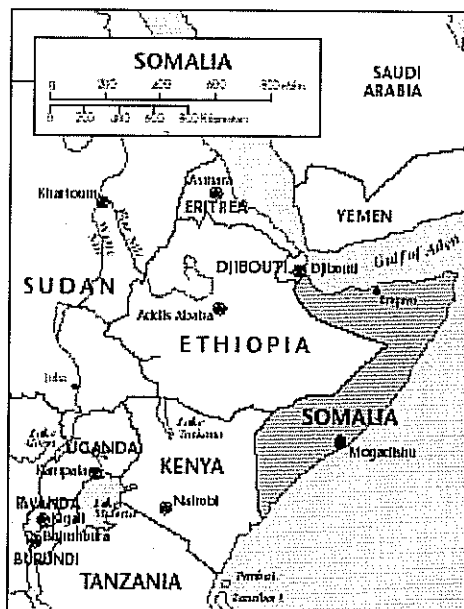
Milwaukee

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Background

Like many former colonial states, Somalia has a long history of violence and unrest. The East Africa nation gained its independence from Italian and British rule in 1960. The new country of Somalia was a combination of six major clan families and various smaller sub-clans that had their own history of conflict with each other. In 1969, Mohammed Siad Barre became president of this nation and “systemically replaced top officials” in the government with members of his own clan. By 1988, the Somali National Movement, composed largely of Issaq clan members opposed to Barre, began operating with the intent of removing Barre from power. Several other insurgent groups composed of the various clans formed, and an uprising began with clans trying to unseat Barre while also battling other clans for future control of the nation. In January 1991, the uprising forced Barre to flee the country, but chaos ensued. More than 300,000 Somalis were killed in the war or from the famine that resulted when the militia confiscated and blockaded food shipments.



As a result, 800,000 refugees fled the country and headed, for the most part, to neighboring Kenya. A large number of refugees then immigrated to the United States. The Minneapolis-St. Paul urban area became the *de facto* Somali “capital” of North America with between 10,000 and 30,000 Somalis residing there. The Twin Cities were attractive to Somali immigrants because of an initial attractive job market and experienced refugee social services agencies. In addition, once an initial number of Somali immigrants arrived, they began building an infrastructure of restaurants, shops, and other cultural centers that made other Somalis feel welcome.

However, by the turn of the new century, low-skilled factory jobs were becoming scarce in the Twin Cities. Concurrently, the meatpacking industry and other low-skilled jobs were becoming more available outside the urban center, and the prospect of working these relatively

well-paying jobs attracted Somali immigrants away from the Twin Cities. In addition to work, these smaller communities, such as St. Cloud, MN; Rochester, MN; and Barron, WI, had less-crowded schools, less expensive cost of living, and lower crime rates. In the small Wisconsin towns, Somali youth also benefited from the fact that they did not have to pass the standardized high school graduation exam that Minnesota required.

The movement of Somalis to smaller communities has not always been easy for Somalis or the communities, but there is empirical evidence that it can be mutually beneficial. In Lewiston, ME, the mayor wrote an open letter in 2002 to the relatively new Somali community that had settled there requesting that they stop encouraging their friends and family to follow them to Maine. Fortunately for Lewiston, the Somali immigrants did not pass on the mayor's message, and by 2004 the previously "dying" town was named one of the best places to do business in America, and by 2007 the National Civil League named Lewiston an "All-America City."

In Barron, WI, approximately 13 percent of the population is Somali. They began moving there in 1999 when the Jennie'O Turkey Store experienced a labor shortage in its poultry processing plant. The town was not prepared for the sudden increase of largely non-English speaking, Muslim residents. Schools and medical facilities did not have interpreters, and the plant did not initially offer English classes for the new workers. Grocery stores did not stock *halal* meats or the seasonings the Somalis consumed. Students in Barron schools did not understand why Somali girls could wear their *hijab*, but they could not wear hats. After the September 11 attacks, a Somali flag was desecrated, and there were other altercations. Barron also had a shortage of affordable housing that limited Somalis to live in one of two apartment complexes on the outskirts of town.

Despite these initial obstacles, Barron has begun to make necessary changes. The school district has an ESL program, requires staff to undergo diversity education, and initiated a soccer team that helped bridge cultural gaps. The owners of the apartment complex were responsive to the needs of the Somalis and made reasonable accommodations. Stores are beginning to stock Somali foods and goods.

The movement of Somalis continues as some of the immigrants are taking jobs at a vegetable canning plant in Balsam Lake, a computer manufacturing plant in Chippewa Falls, and a furniture plant in Cumberland. These communities will face the same challenges as Barron and other small towns to which Somalis moved. These communities can greatly benefit from the experience of other small towns that have made the successful transition to becoming more diverse communities.

In this report, the testimony of presenters at the Wisconsin Advisory Committee's September 15, 2011, community forum are presented. The agenda for this meeting is included in Appendix A, and the full unedited transcript is available via the Midwestern Regional Office of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. The presenters' statements have been edited and categorized for coherence and clarity.

The Somali Immigrant Experience: Similar yet Different

Although immigrants have many commonalities in their experience coming to the United States, presenters at the community forum stressed that Somali immigrants experience a very unique situation. According to scholars who presented at the community forum, a number of simultaneous factors contribute to create this uniqueness. First, Somalis came to the United

States suddenly as a result of a violent civil war. They had not been planning to come to America, saving money, or otherwise preparing themselves. They fled to the United States. This “sudden appearance,” as scholars regard it, in the United States provided them little time to understand American culture and the racial dynamics of America. It also provided American cities and towns that came to host Somali immigrants little time to understand their new neighbors. Second, Somali immigrants had little in common upon which they could build relationships with their host communities. Most Somalis are dark skinned, Muslim, and do not speak English. In comparison, immigrants from Latin America are often dark skinned and do not speak English, but they generally share the Christian faith with their new neighbors.

**Abdi Kusow, Professor of Sociology
Iowa State University**

I want to start from the idea of diminished state structures. And I want to add one word, which is spontaneous diminished state structures that resulted from the end of the Cold War. What that means is that Somalis have experienced a spontaneous civil war without any warning. So the gap with the research is that most of these immigrants are coming from situations where there are still state structures. So you take the Mexican case, even though they engage in the same thing, when they go back they can negotiate with an existing state structure, both for exit and for return.

So this is actually my contribution to the literature, to suggest that we have to think beyond that and think about the spontaneity. Now, spontaneity then also suggests the Somali diaspora. Because of the extreme diminishing state structure, the Somali diaspora becomes a de facto nation itself for the Somali society.

The idea of spontaneous diminished state structure that leads to a spontaneous transnational exit provides a condition in which people would suddenly exist -- again, what I refer to as transnational spontaneous existence in the whole society. Taken together, these sociological forces create a condition in which Somalis suddenly appear in Lewiston, Maine, in Barron, Wisconsin, in Owatonna, Minnesota. They do not only spontaneously appear there -- and the idea of this spontaneous appearance has implications for the host and for the community at the same time. It's that spontaneous appearance which creates the condition in which the host society has no prior awareness of the cultural, social background of this community.

I want to add that spontaneous existence for the host society and the immigrant community include consideration of the cultural characteristics: religion, race, and culture. What I mean by that is that the Somali society may be one of the few societies in the United States that is African, black, Muslim, and non-English speaking at the same time. What that creates is that non-Christianity, non-English speaking, Africaness and blackness at the same time is also added to the possibility that the Somali community themselves are not aware [of the true meaning of these differences in a particular American culture].

This spontaneity creates a condition for Somali society, a condition in which they are not aware of the racial matrix or the grammar of the United States. And therefore, they go to communities or destinations that they are interested in because of social and economic opportunities without figuring the racial matrix of the United States. What that means is that, for example, the African American individual, or the residences of the minority community of the United States, if they are in Detroit, Philadelphia, wherever they are, if they want to move to a smaller town they think about the racial and cultural background of that society. Somalis are not

necessarily aware of this racial matrix. Then they basically end up using the idea of opportunities and nothing else, and so that then creates a condition in which we have host communities that are not aware of the Somali community, and the Somali community that is not aware of the host community. And so that creates really an interesting dynamics in this sense.

What I want to also add then is that the Somali community, because of the diminished state structures, because of the political chaos, what I now refer to as a permanent political chaos, creates a condition in which they are simultaneously here and there. They spend a good amount of their time thinking about the situation in Somalia. That creates a condition in which they do not have enough area to think about their own environment or surrounding.

Because of these multiplications, we have a condition in which the community that we are discussing may be, and I don't want to say unique, may be fundamentally different from the other ethnic and racial communities that the small town, Midwestern communities have experienced. And beyond that, I have data on social economic achievement from 1980, 1990, and 2000. When you compare it to other African immigrants, you will find that the indicators are low for the community, so economic class adds to the situation as well.

If it is, for example, Mexican immigrants in Barron, Wisconsin, at least Christianity serves some kind of level of understanding in this sense. So that is what I want to point out. The idea is that Somalis then move from a homeland context, carrying all these different cultural, social, and religious background, and confront another social structure that is fundamentally different, in a way, at least initially, the Somali community and the host communities in the small towns are operating from fundamentally different assumptions. And so that creates a condition in which the level of civil rights issues appear more frequently than compared to other communities. Everything they do is magnified because when we see a black female in a Hijab, we don't see skin color. We see something else right away, and it is these multiplications that really bring these problems together.

**Cawo Abdi, Professor of Sociology
University of Minnesota**

I think what I want to start with is that Somali migration is very much part and parcel of increasing African migration or black migration to the U.S. that started since the 1970's. When you compare it to Latin migration or Asian migration, it is still a smaller number, but it is definitely something that is increasing as the years go by.

It is the context of the civil war, the collapse of the Somali state that Professor Kusow has already outlined that really led to the large presence of Somalis in the U.S. now. If you look at the U.S. census in 1990, there were only 2,000 Somalis in the U.S. From 1990 to 2010 over a hundred thousand Somalis were granted either asylum or entered through family sponsorship. So you can go from 2,000 within the span of 20 years to over a hundred thousand Somalis now present on U.S. soil. And Somalis now are the largest African refugee population in the U.S. To give you an example, 5.5 percent of all refugees admitted to the U.S. from 1983 to 2000 were Somalis. From 2001 to 2005, that number increased to 25 percent; only second to the Cuban refugee population admitted to the U.S.

The Somali Immigrant Experience: Why Wisconsin?

A common question that arises in regard to Somali communities is how they chose to settle in the Midwest. In this case, the question is how and why they ended up in a small, western

Wisconsin town like Barron. The Committee asked presenters to address this question. In addition, the presenters who live in western Wisconsin and, in some cases, spent most of their lives in western Wisconsin, described what the region was like before Somalis began to settle and how people of the area responded to their new neighbors.

**Cawo Abdi, Professor of Sociology
University of Minnesota**

One question that we often hear is, "Why the Midwest? It is very cold; the freezing snow belt of the U.S." I think it is probably a complex answer, but in my research there are two factors that might explain why you have such a large Somali settlement, especially in the Twin Cities region.

The first one is migration here started in early 1990's, and Minnesota had one of the best economies in the U.S. at that time. The unemployment rate was less than three percent. So Somalis, if individuals came, went to the meat plants in St. Cloud, Willmar, and other places and were hired on the spot. People said they were hired the same day they went to the meat plants. And then we would call others who may have initially settled in Nashville or San Diego and say, "There are jobs here."

It's important, of course, to understand why people are so desperate to find jobs as soon as they land on U.S. soil. I think this is one of the two factors, for me, which really complicates things and is an integral part of understanding Somali migration. Those two factors are, one, the limited human capital that Somalis came with.

What I mean by limited human capital is that the language skills and also transferable credentials that they could bring to the U.S., which is very limited. The Somali language was only written in 1973. Prior to that, only small number of people got education in English, Italian, or Arabic. So prior to 1973, there was not much public education available to Somalis. The Somali language was written and education was in Somali, at least up to high school. Then, at University level, education was mostly in Italian. So a lot of Somali refugees who came to the U.S. had very little English language and skills that they could use here, but also they came with very little higher education, for example, that translated in the American labor force.

The second factor that's very important is the protracted conflict that continues in Somalia. Every Somali who came to the U.S. has left behind dozens of family members who are in desperate situations, either refugee camps, possibly internally displaced within Somalia, or making ends meet outside of the southern region where the conflict is most now concentrated. What that means is when Somalis come to the U.S., it is imperative to get a job, whatever that job might be.

So for many Somalis, it is a luxury to pursue education. I'm talking about adults here. It is a luxury to pursue English language acquisition skills. These are people who only say, "Where are the jobs?" And in the Midwest, places like Barron, Wisconsin for example, you have meat plants, poultry plants; and many people are going to those places because those are jobs that require very little English, and they are available. The jobs are there. So people are willing to go to small Midwestern, Christian, white-dominated centers because that's irrelevant to the imperative of getting a job and providing for the families left behind. So the need to work is very much, very much important for Somalis who are settled in bigger metropolitan centers like Columbus, Ohio, or Minneapolis, Minnesota. You have social services there. You have agencies

and institutions that have been created over the course of the last few decades with the experience of settlements.

These areas had experience with Hmong population, for example, and Vietnamese refugees, so they have some resources established that were very important in receiving the Somalian refugee community. You don't have that type of institution or support in small towns like Barron. So I think that is where some cultural clashes and problems might arise. So as Dr. Kusow said, Somalis are very distant foreigners because of that. Their distinct difference in terms of religious, racial, and ethnic identities are highlighted in small towns. And in addition, these are people who are desperately coming to work; I think no different than the Mexican agricultural labor force that's everywhere in the U.S.

**David Vruwink, Mayor
City of Barron**

Of course, when I was first in Barron, first growing up, it was pretty much Scandinavian and German backgrounds. I can remember the churches, different churches in town. I was Methodist, which had a lot of different cultures, but I am a full blooded Dutchman, and I was kind of out of water with the rest. They used to call me the wooden shoer, just kidding. I accepted that. It was all right.

But I have seen some big changes in Barron. Like I said, when I grew up it was strictly white, strictly Scandinavian, German background for the most part. I remember when we first started teaching, we had some immigrants from Mexico that came. And of course, they had an advantage certainly, which was [shared] religion. They were predominantly Christian Catholic, so they mixed in the community that way.

I remember their struggles, learning the English language, working with and going on. But slowly, and some of these immigrants that first came, we don't even think of them any different. They are just part of our community like they have been here all their life. I think that will happen with the Somalian community as we adjust.

Right now I have two grandchildren that are in the elementary school, Woodland School. Last year, my little grandson was in kindergarten, and I volunteered. You watch the innocence of youth. There is no discrimination. There is nothing. They all work together. It's kind of cute. They will grab a hold of you and say, "Help me, help me." But I watch the Somalian children working with the white children, and I don't see that discrimination there. It's the innocence of youth.

Where I saw the discrimination was as they get older. Certainly, we have some of our older community that have a tough time adjusting. You can see that, but I see that getting better and better every day and every year. I certainly see discrimination in the high school in my years there, when the Somalians came; and certainly there was some racial problems at that time.

Slowly, I think with Monti [Hallberg's] help and with the school officials - the principals and the teachers - these barriers are slowly being overcome. I see a whole different attitude. I saw two students just yesterday going down the hall; one Somalian, one white. They had their arms around each other, and they were kidding each other. And you know, it was a close bond.

**Abdi Si Taar Doon
Barron Resident**

I would like to say that what Cawo said is that right. We were attracted by the Jennie-O Turkey Store, and that is the reason behind our arrival. I was told that the first group that came to Barron were six people - four female and two male - after a turkey plant was shut down in 1995. So they were given the choice either to go to Fargo, Minnesota, where they have another plant, or here in Barron. Then they choose here in Barron. So those are the first group who came. After that then, there is three, four, six, you know, larger numbers coming over the years.

In 2002, they opened the International Center. That center is facilitated by the Job Center, which is a big company that's operators nine counties, including our county. Nasra, who is not here today, and Jane Littiget, (ph) who was the supervisor at that time at the Job Center in Rice Lake started the International Center. They started providing interpretation services through the county and E.S.L. classes which helps.

But now there is a different entity that is trying to form itself, and it's called Barron Somali Community Association. Mohamed was elected as the President of the Somalian Association. But the International Center still provides those services, and as a community we are really appreciative of that.

Another factor which contributed to more Somalians becoming interested in coming to Barron County is in 2006, Wisconsin started paying refugee cash assistance, which was \$628 to help them settle, pay the rent, and people depended on that \$600. So we thought that may be another factor as well, since we know that there is no new Somali arrivals coming nowadays [because the cash assistance ended]

Also, the International Center created a Barron Diversity Council which normally is meant to address the issues that the Somalian community faces. And it is made up of member organizations that provided services to new arrivals, or the Somalian community, in Barron.

Monti Hallberg **Barron Area School District Administrator**

I think it started in the late '90's; '98, '99. Our school had just a few Somali students in the late '90's and early 2000. I arrived in 2001, and we may have had ten students, ten Somalian students at that time. It grew, peaked in 2008, and we had roughly around 80, 85 Somalian students in our school district. The school district has a population of about 1,400 or 1,500 students. So roughly, we are looking at about five or six percent of our student body being Somalian students.

They came to Barron for a couple different reasons; certainly the work, but some of them came because Minnesota had a required state graduation test in English. Wisconsin was about to move towards that required state graduation test, but Wisconsin never initiated that. And I think a lot of the Somalians felt that the chances of graduating from our school was a little bit easier because they didn't have to take this required test. I think that was certainly a part of it.

So we have seen a lot of the students come to us in their last year or two years of high school, and it varied. Some had been in the United States for five years. Some had been in the United States for ten years. Some had been in the United States for one week. Prior, we had many Hispanics coming into our community in the 1990's and 1980's, and there were some commonalities there.

Mohamed Dirie, President **Barron Somali Community Association**

The first thing that I want to talk about is how I got here. Actually, the others here have their stories, but for me it wasn't my choice; my parents' choice in the first place. Second is coming from a big city, growing up in huge city just like Chicago and coming to the states, my parents kind of felt like I need to be some safe place, some place that I can be, you know, safe and help myself and learn, and pretty much in the school. In the cities there are a lot of negatives and a lot of bad influence. They didn't want me to be in that kind of situation.

When I first come to Barron, it was middle of February, snowing. I still remember that night, real snow. And first thing I said to my brother, I look at him and I was like, "What is this? Is this a farm or something?" And he looked at me back, and it was like, "This is your new home. You are going to stay here for awhile." And I was thinking, "Okay, he just kidding, right? He's just joking around."

When we got to our apartments, no one was around. It was just empty, shallow. And coming from a big place, you have friends. You have families and everything. And coming to Barron, in the small community, middle of February, snowing, it's a shock. And next morning we went to the school, and I thought I was going to see a lot of people just like Minneapolis or Chicago. And it was about 300 kids. And the school that I was in before that time was about 3,000 kids, multi-cultural. And I looked around. It was like, okay, another huge change for me. This is not happening. For me it was like, okay, why do they want me to be here? Why do my parents chose to be in Barron? You could go to different places. We could have gone to suburbs. We could have gone to other places, but why did they chose Barron and the situation they chose?

First, it was kind of easy for them to find a job in the plant, that they don't have to drive. They don't need to have language skills to get the job. And the rent was cheap, and it was a safe place to raise a kid, especially when you are in junior high, and everything is a big deal for you. That is the main reason, I guess, my parents chose to be here.

It was hard, especially being the first kid. Not just Somali kid, I was first black kid to be in the school, in middle school. And everybody knew each other since they were in kindergarten. You just get there, and you try to get to know them, and they kind of distance themselves away from you. It was like a cultural shock. It was like, "okay, I have the feeling that they don't want me here." They didn't want me, but at the same time I felt that okay, they don't know me. Maybe that's the main reason they are trying to avoid me. And as the time went on and a lot of things changed, things got better in middle school.

Then I went to high school, and it was totally new world to me. It was like this group, this group, this friends, that friends. You are a freshman. You are this. You are that. And again, I have to adjust to that kind of situation. It was tough. It was hard.

Challenge and Response: Cultural Distance

Given the "spontaneous appearance" of Somali immigrants in the small town of Barron and the fact that Somalies were so distinct in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and cultural capital from their hosts, it is not unexpected that challenges ensued. A common challenge that presenters mentioned was general cultural misunderstanding of each other. This challenge plays itself out in many of the more specific challenges, but the Committee found many of the presenters' statements regarding the broader topic particularly insightful.

**Cawo Abdi, Professor of Sociology
University of Minnesota**

So many of these new comers have very little time or contact with the main stream community. And then main stream small town Midwestern populations see these new comers who look so different, who dress so different, and who are segregating themselves in certain ways, and start to question their commitment to that community, their commitment to integrate into the American socio-cultural context. And I think what emerged is a certain distance and alienation between these two communities, oftentimes based on very little information that's available in the local context and also very little education that's available to the migrants themselves because when we talk about social and civic engagement, when we talk about social integration, we are talking about a two-way street.

But what we have is our two communities, who have very little information of each other, especially in the post-9/11 context and the recent highly publicized Minnesota youth disappearance where Somalis have emerged tainted by some of those politics, the war on terror, etc., so Somalis have become more and more alienated within the main stream discourse. And the workers working in the meat plant, I think, even though they hear that, that's still a distance for them to understand. It's the imperative of work, imperative of survival that emerges as very important.

So the stress, I think, in terms of cultural conflict, the distance, I think those are very important. From my research in the Minnesota context, I haven't done research in Wisconsin, but I think there are a lot of similarities in terms of characteristics and experiences. I think there is a need for more resources for both main stream institutions like social service programs, but also resources to educate the Somalis themselves that they need to try and work hard to also become part of the larger community.

Monti Hallberg
Barron Area School District Administrator

I have a unique perspective, coming into Barron in 2001, because I spent 16 years of my career overseas; in Saudi Arabia 11 years, and in Pakistan for five years. So I came from two countries that were very much under the Islamic religious rule. I think when they hired me back in 2001, they liked the fact that I had some cultural diversity background. I came to Barron understanding Islamic culture.

And from a bigger perspective, there are differences in cultures no matter where you go. If you live in London, it's going to have a different culture. If you lived in East Africa, which I visited two or three times, there is a different culture. And if you lived in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, there is a different culture.

There are some common denominators in those places, and we have some similarities; But, the growth of the Somali community is magnified more so in Barron than it would be in Columbus, Ohio or Minneapolis, St. Paul, or Chicago because Barron didn't have a lot of cultural diversity. So when we have a person of color walking down the street in Barron, that's magnified considerably. If [a person of color walked down the street] in Minneapolis, St. Paul, or Columbus, Ohio you wouldn't really -- it would just kind of blend in a little more than it certainly did here.

Abdi Si Taar Doon
Barron Resident

I did couple presentations at the International Center about the Somalian culture, but I didn't get any cultural presentation from the other side. And what I know about Barron culture is only from the questions I ask when I am faced with the situation. One time I remember that in the legal side, we wrote bullies in school to actually learn about the law from them and what makes you get in trouble. But the other side, we don't know much about the American culture.

**Saeed Fahia, Executive Director
Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota**

Sometimes it's misunderstanding. I have worked with a woman went on a break at her job. She went outside. She wants to pray. She did ablution, [which requires that she] wash her face, hands, legs, as part of Islamic tradition. Someone sees her and asks, "What are you doing?" She tries to explain she is praying or having ablution. However, she didn't have the language, so they didn't understand that. She was fired, and they thought that she was doing something unclean. And so we were called later to talk to them and explain Islamic ablution. And she was hired back. But, there have been a lot of issues with prayer in Minnesota and probably everywhere.

Building Cultural Understanding

Although it was a common theme that the Somali community and the residents of Barron had very little cultural understanding of each other initially, most people made efforts to begin the process of understanding. Presenters discussed some of these efforts, small and large, to help build cultural understanding of each other and to build community unity.

**David Vruwink, Mayor
City of Barron**

My friends encouraged me to run for city council, but I still teach Driver's Ed. So I have a very close relationship with the Somalian community. I remember one time last fall we were getting in the Driver's Ed car. I was filling out the forms for the permit. And so I said, "Boy, I sure have a tough time with some of your names." They looked at me and said, "We have a tough time with your name. So it was mutual."

Mohamed [Dirie] came to our church last year. After services, we had a forum there, and some of our members, I remember them walking away afterwards and asking Mohamed questions about coming from Somalia and the Somalian nation and all the other issues. And they walked away, and they said, "Boy, I never even knew that." That was a huge learning experience for some of our members, especially some of our older members that maybe had some areas of discrimination; but that was a huge learning.

**Monti Hallberg
Barron Area School District Administrator**

Coming to Barron, we did have our issues. We did have some people that didn't understand, and I think the major difference is cultural understanding would be really beneficial. The support system, when they landed on the ground here in Barron from Somalia, there wasn't really any transitional setup going on. We had to organize all that. So we formed a Cultural

Diversity Council in Barron, and I served on it. There was a member from the Turkey Store who served on it. We had city council sitting on it. We had our E.S.L. teachers on it; members of the Somali community sitting on it.

We paid a lot of attention. We got the International Center in Barron open. We found housing, found a place for that. The International Center was a place where Somalis could go to land their feet and to try to figure out where to find housing, how to enroll into school; and they had set up some English language classes there. They had ten computers there as well to help them, and we had a couple different programs to work on that for awhile. And you know, that's always a struggle.

I think if you ask the Somalis that were back in early 2000's, "What are some of the things you need?" Learning English was number one on their list. Housing was number two, adequate housing. So I think those are the things in the beginning, if you think about your basic needs, those are some of those basic needs that you arrive at.

There was some lack of acceptance in Barron, and we had some people -not necessarily in the city of Barron, but Barron area as a school district that goes 30 miles north and south with some small towns north and south of us- so that they were wondering why are these people of different culture here. And we had some people actually say, "Why don't they go home." That was alarming to me and alarming to a lot of the people, and that was a minority. I want to say that was a minority of people. It was probably five or ten percent of the people in our community that really felt that way, but it was embarrassing for me as a person with a cultural background to do that.

We had -- the Turkey Store Corporation, the Jennie-O Turkey Store, which is owned by Hormel. We kind of looked to them because they were the major employer. They were looked to, to be seen as why the people are drawing there. They kind of had a hands off -- they stood back. They didn't want to get involved. They felt their role was just as an employer, not so much as they didn't want to be involved in arranging housing and even the E.S.L. classes. They did have a member on our committee, but I think they just wanted to make sure that their role was employment, and it wasn't any further as far as [assisting in] social acceptance. So I think we looked to them for some help, and they were helping behind the scenes. But publicly, they didn't have any cultural programs going on.

So the question becomes what do we do about our new visitors in Barron? So we thought about -- I think the thing that we worked on was, the biggest problem was cultural diversity ignorance of Barron. I think it was lack of understanding of culture, lack of understanding of history. They didn't understand why the Somalis had come to Barron. They didn't understand their background in the civil wars that they have gone through and the refugee status that they had; and we really didn't have a systematic plan for immigration into our community. It was really nothing there.

So we were picking up the pieces and trying to do the best we could as a community. And I think the other thing, anytime there was an issue with a Somali, it was magnified. It was magnified. If there was a car accident downtown, it was magnified. And all of a sudden, it was all of the Somalis are bad drivers, except it was just one accident. Or you know, we had a couple crime issues. There was a stabbing involving two Somalis, and it was really magnified. If it would have been a Barron resident with an accident, we had a lady drive through a barbershop in front of the building, and she was a Barron resident, but that didn't make as much headlines as it would be for something like that. So I think it was somewhat magnified at the time because whenever that happened, and I think the Somali community realized that they

represented, each one of them represented the whole Somalian culture. They had a lot of responsibility on their back, and I think they -- so we looked at cultural awareness. We looked at that.

The foods were an issue. Where do we buy our foods that we are used to? So with the restaurant opened up in Barron, and that was Somalian businessmen that really opened that up, and they can provide groceries there. They can buy groceries there as well as prepare food, the Somalian food. But if you walked into our grocery store, you wouldn't find any East African foods that you would find in a Somalian culture. A lot of people don't realize that Somalia and Ethiopia were Italian colonies. There are a lot of pastas that go into Somalian foods. So you would have a lot of, you know, cultural awareness.

We have a videotape that we produced. And what we did is an interview session. It was done by a Barron County leadership group as a project. The tape was placed in all the libraries, placed in the school. We had it on our school web site for awhile, and it was a panel of people where we interviewed Somalian citizens.

One interesting thing about this whole thing is the Hispanic community came forward and said, what about us? What about us in this whole thing? We were here in the '90's, and nobody ever stepped forward for us. We never had a Diversity Council, you know. So what we did is we brought in -- in this tape, you will see a Hispanic person coming in and, you know, talking about their plight. We had a Hmong person that was working in the Turkey Store as well and, you know, they talked about -- so a lot of focus had been in Barron because it's numbers were great and it happened so fast. But what about the other immigrants that have come to our area? It was a good point. We stepped back and said wait a minute, we have others in here, too, as we have to look at that; but English language assistance.

I talked about housing, job assistance. We had a lady who worked for Work Force Development. She was instrumental in helping the Somalian community, and she was on our Diversity Council. Jane Littiget, I think she changed her last name. She is retired now. She was very instrumental. She worked very much. She was on our Diversity Council before. When they have the foods, foods bring people together. Music brings people together. You look for those commonalities, and that's what we tried to do.

We had Cultural Diversity Days in our school, and we would set up booths and set up tents, and we would set up -- it was all cultural. We have that every third year in our school district. It's a big thing. We put it in the gymnasium. We have people from various countries representing their part. I set up -- I brought back a big Pakistani tent and talked a little bit about the culture in Pakistan. That was my booth I set up. I think the thing we wanted to do, looking at common ground, we did a lot. We had a Diversity Council. Our school E. S. L. Department was up there. We trained our teachers. The work force development was good. International Center, E. S. L. classes.

**Osman Mosse, Director
Barron Somali Community Association**

Most of Somalian people, they work in Jennie-O Turkey Store, which is one of largest turkey stores of the world. They have very good employee rules about respecting the other religions and faiths. Somali employees, when they are working in the factory, they are able to practice their religion and pray at the prayer times. They get all their rights from the company.

And as we are Barron Somalian Community, we always try to be with the other communities. Last year there was a 150 years anniversary, sesquicentennial of Barron, and all the communities were sharing their culture and different foods and activities. We got that opportunity to share with our other communities, and we got an appreciation letter from the mayor.

**Roger Rivard, Wisconsin State Representative
75th Assembly District**

So I guess there needs to be a meeting of the mind, and we are all headed in the same direction. We just have to start pulling on the same rope. Some of the things that came to me over the years were isolation was a big thing, that the Somali community seemed to be so isolated. That's because of the cultural issues and all of the differences. And the people on one side are saying they don't say hi to me. Guess what? People on the other side are saying the same thing; they don't say hi to me, either.

A great story from 50 years ago. My mother came home one day. She said, "I was walking down the street, and I saw so and so, and she didn't say hi." Dad said, "Well, did you say hi to her?" She said, "No."

It is the same issue, but they didn't have cultural issues. I know that the people from Somali culture tend to spend more time outside. They tend to congregate in outside areas like parks. We don't. When they saw the Somalis coming into the parks, they thought they were taking over. That was quite a few years ago when I heard that. And they said well, they are not very friendly. Well, it's the same thing. If you don't say hi to them, they are not going to say hi to you. It's on both sides, but the one side always thinks the other side is different, and they are not. They are the same. They just don't bring it out and talk about it.

I guess interaction and outreach are the biggest things. I guess if I would give any advice to the Somali community, the effort like the Niagara Foundation is making to actually go out and interact with the community, I suppose a lot of that has to do with the language issues and different things like that. Those, over time, will be taken care of. Time does heal all those things.

Soccer

Since Somalis and the residents of Barron did not share common skin color, religion, history, or language, it became important for these communities to unify around something. After seeing a group of Somali children playing soccer one afternoon, Monti Hallberg realized that the game could be the key to building relationships between Somali students and the students who were born in Barron. It was such a crucial turning point that numerous presenters discussed its impact.

**Monti Hallberg
Barron Area School District Administrator**

One day I was driving by a field. I was driving by this playground area, and in that open field was grass. I saw about 30 to 40 young men playing soccer, all Somalian. I stopped my car, I got out, and I just sat there for awhile. I came from an area where soccer is big, outside the United States, and it's getting bigger in the United States. But I said, "We need to have a soccer team." That moment right there was an [urgent] moment. Typically on a plan like that, you go out and you plan for a year. You get a committee together. I didn't waste any time. I said, "We

are going to have a soccer team.” I put it on the forum. I sent it into the state. I didn't even know how many soccer players we were going to have, but we started the soccer team. And I think that really reduced a lot of the tensions in our school district. We saw teammates walking down the hallway, you know, high five-ing, and they got to know each other. They got to know each other through a sport. That was one of the things I am very proud of, and it has grown, our soccer program.

Now we have 400 youth soccer players in our community. We have some Somalians playing soccer. Mohamed was a soccer player. My son was a soccer player. Mohamed and my son still remain friends, and they still talk to one another, and so forth.

**Mohamed Dirie, President
Barron Somali Community Association**

And the thing that was the [biggest] problem was cultural differences; people not knowing each other. And Mr. Hallberg, who is a great man, came up with a great idea, and knowing the cultural difference helped a lot to bring, to come up with [a solution to] this situation.

The school didn't have soccer program. And in Somali culture, actually in the rest of the world except U.S., soccer, what we call football, [is the] number one sport in the whole universe except U.S. And he contacted me, contacted the community, and he pushed to have the soccer program to have in the school. That was big help [towards building cultural understanding]. That was a big relief. The kids got to learn each other. It just opened doors for them and for us, too, to know each other, to learn from each other while we practice and while we are in the school. That just broke the barrier between us. That is the cultural situation.

**Mayor David Vruwink
City of Barron**

As they mentioned, with the soccer I have seen big changes. It is a way that they are mixing the cultures together. They work as a team, which has really helped break down some of the cultural barriers.

Challenge: The Dream of Return Problem

During the community forum, Chairman Mekraz asked the panelists a questions that spurred extended conversation and raised a little discussed challenge that many immigrants face but few native inhabitants realize. As Chairman Mekraz stated,

I have a question for the panelists about what I call the immigrant mind-set, or perhaps immigrant dilemma. I happen to know this because I am an immigrant myself. I came to the United States back in 1986 as a political refugee from Libya. One of the things I had to deal with, other than the identity issue, is that you have discussed am I here long term or short term.

And you know, that's important because your life doesn't move forward, like things like pursuing education, starting a business, or buying a home. You say well, maybe the conflict will be over in a couple years, and I will go back to my home country. I don't really need to do all of this stuff. So you wait for awhile, and suddenly you are

married. Suddenly you have kids. Suddenly you realize, my goodness, I think this is going to be a long term here. It is not going to be pack up and leave tomorrow.

I wish that someone had explained this to me at the time because nobody did, and I didn't understand it. And it was an obstacle. I didn't -- a lot of these decisions I postponed. No, I don't want to do this now. I warrant to wait to see what happens in Libya. Well, Muammar Gaddafi was just pushed out of power. I have been here since 1986. You see how long it took.

**Cawo Abdi, Professor of Sociology
University of Minnesota**

There is actually literature on the Italian migrants and Irish migrants in the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century. Most of them had their bags all ready, the luggage on the side, thinking, "We will go back." You know, the Italians were always sending money to whichever region they came from, building homes, investing with the dream. It's called the dream of return. It's the myth of return, I guess.

Somalis are no different, actually. There is a paper I am working on that deals with that, and that psychologically is very important for people to believe that there is hope, that they want to return, that their migration was not intentional. It was not intentional because we did not say we want to go to America and make money, but it was forced migration. And they are here now, and there is hope that Somalia will get better.

A lot of Somalis, whatever they save are still investing in infrastructure and businesses in Somalia. I think they probably will be exactly like the Italians and Irish. But I think that is a dilemma that all first generation of migrants have experienced and will probably continue to experience.

There is that part of you that still lies on the other side of the ocean, and that you want to be buried where you were born. But the fact of the matter remains Somali conflict now is over 20 years old. Even to rebuild Somalia would take, even if the conflict stops now, we are probably talking another 20, 30 years to really create something that's functional. So in reality, not many people probably will return. But people are always here and there.

**Abdi Kusow, Professor of Sociology
Iowa State University**

I think yes, from the Italian to the Irish to the Dutch immigrants, that has been the case. But I think it's also complicated by social economic status. So in my own case, I left Somalia two years before [Prof. Abdi] left, and I came here in '84. Somalia was okay at the time. So I did not want to actually go back because I had better opportunity here. But one of the problems is that it is a matter of social class and opportunity. I think Somali immigrants now who are struggling with social economic conditions, that part of the Somali community will maintain the return ideology more so than the individuals who are more successful, I think.

**Roger Rivard, Wisconsin State Representative
75th Assembly District**

Well, this is very interesting because I think this is one of the big misconceptions that a lot of people in this country have. We made the assumption, I think a lot of us made the

assumption that when you come here you come here permanently, not knowing - there's a lack of communication - that many people are here as refugees and really did not intend to be here permanently.

I think a lot of people in this country, you came to be here permanently. You need to assimilate because you are going to be here forever. Well, then in your mind you are thinking I am not going to be here forever, there is no need to do that. We have two diabolically different thought processes going on here. That could be a major problem.

Osman Mosse, Director
Barron Somali Community Association

I can't say this is permanent or temporary, but I can say this is long term. We just got our application approved for five lots in Rice Lake if some Somali parents in the community die in Barron County. We applied for that in case one of us died in Barron County. So this is long term. We are applying. We are planning to live the rest of the life here unless there is another opportunity better than this, maybe; but this is long term.

Challenge: Community Building and Accessing Social Services

The presenters discussed more specific challenges regarding the integration of Somali immigrants into the Barron community. For Somali communities, they expressed deep desire to be self-sufficient and to build their community from the inside. At the same time, the community in Barron faced problems as a result of the lack of services provided in rural western Wisconsin compared to urban Minneapolis. Saeed Fahia who heads the Somali community organization in neighboring Minneapolis, discussed social services issues that he commonly sees in his work with Somali immigrants in the urban setting. His comments are included here as a reference point for comparison and to highlight the unique challenges Somalis encountered in a rural setting like Barron.

Mohamed Dirie, President
Barron Somali Community Association

As a community, we help each other. We are there for each other. We do fundraising for each other when someone needs help. We have a mosque which we go to pray. We have pretty much all the basic stuff that we need as a community, but we don't have the service that we need as a community to be a full control community.

People that work for us, that helps us a lot, but we can't depend on them all the time. We need to stand on our own feet. We need to be, you know, a community that's there. But the lack of service, lack of financials, you know, it feels kind of empty. You need to do something, but you can't. You can't move forward unless you have the help, unless you have someone there for you to help you. We can't do anything by ourselves.

I mean, the thing that happened before, there was kids coming from the cities, drug dealers coming from the cities, people with negative attitude coming from the cities, coming to Barron. They influence the kids, the young ones in the school, especially the high school kids. With the help of Barron Police Department and Sheriff's Department, we get rid of them. We had times that we, every Wednesday that you read the newspaper there was a break-in, there was a robbery, there was something going on, and it was just the people that was in Barron. But

they were Somalians, but at the same time they are in Barron so they were, must be part of the community. But most of them come from the cities, I mean, especially summertime.

Now we figure out a way to get rid of them. We just, if the person is there, new to us, we don't know them, and they are kind of acting shady, we pretty much report to the police department. And that's how we get rid of all the bad influence, bad negatives that, of those coming from the cities.

**Saeed Fahia, Executive Director
Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota**

In terms of services that the [Minneapolis] community of Somalis receive, they usually receive them from main stream organizations, voluntary organizations, agencies like Social Services. In Minnesota, I'm talking about Family Services, National Youth of Minnesota, and many others. Those organizations have all great track records of working with immigrants and refugees. They do a lot.

Our organization is more of a type of what they call assistance associations of the organizations started by the communities themselves to serve their members. In that capacity, we feel we fill a gap where those organizations, better resourced organizations, cannot do. Usually, we have the language. We know the culture. We are kind of an interpreter, and we help with a lot of services that help the community understand systems.

For example, in our organization we have social services. Mainly, we help people with housing, immigration services, helping them with applications, and we do a lot of referral for other organizations, or we do the services ourselves. We help people become fully functional in their society, to become contributing members. For example, someone may come in and need a driver's license. So you help them and connect them to driving school. You, the agency, might pay for that. Someone wants to become a nurse, and you help them with that, too; pay the fees to do that, or you know a program that is free where they can attend. They might need to go back to school or college, and so you help them with that. There are always legal issues that you help them with, lawyers and interpretations and that. So we also have youth programs where we help the youth, children with homework; help them with reading, math.

Also part of that is cultural. We have cultural programs. We have children that learn about their culture, their values, and we also have a lot of children who are having problems, some in gangs. So you have most of the kids who live in the neighborhoods where there is a lot of drugs, lots of crime. So they are at risk, and you try to help them with those services and working with the police and courts and so on. For example, in Minneapolis we used to have a program called Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative. The idea is that the mistake of the children, they have their first crime. They do not go to jail or prison and become better criminals. Instead, they used to send them to us, and we help.

Other programs include education language. That means helping people understand and navigate systems. In that capacity, what we do is invite speakers to the community, have programs that talk about different aspects of agencies or government, whether they are governmental or private. For example, I will describe one such community. Somalis in Minnesota, actually in Minneapolis, have a lot of children with autism. It's something unheard of in Somalia. Maybe there was autism in Somalia, but I never heard about it or anybody talk about it. But when a study was done, they found that Somalis are at risk of children with autism in Minneapolis. With schools, parents, everybody was kind of terrorized by that, so they sometimes

would keep their children from taking immunization shots. And what happened is that one child was taken back to Somalia -- not Somalia, actually Kenya. The child came back, had measles, infected other children; and so there was a scare in the community and everywhere. And so we as a community had to arrange a meeting with health officials and doctors and nurses of the community. There are some Somali doctors in Twin Cities, and they assured the community that they can immunize their children. So it's like that.

Another example was that at one time a Somali was murdered. His body was taken to the city examiner. The community [leaders] went there and said we want to bury him quickly, and the city examiner asked, "Are you next of kin?" "Yes," they said. "So who are you?" the examiner asked. They said they were his clan. That was not good enough. Are you a sister, a brother, or a child? But, he didn't have any children here. So the body had to stay in the hospital for like eight days until it was released. And his children were somewhere in South America. They had to send an affidavit saying that please release him to our relatives. So in that context we invited the city examiner to sit with the community and talk about why, as she explained it to us.

We have other programs like elder support services, where elders are helped through a program called CELIA Community Service, employment program. And so some elders could get services through CELIA. We help them with a lot of issues like finding them a clinic to go to. Some of them are isolated and don't have relatives, so they need socialization, and we take them to centers. Another thing is that in Africa, elders were very important. They used to decide issues, they were like the court system. But here, nobody listens to them. Everybody is going to work. So we try to create a place where they come and work with the community. Sometimes people ask them to mediate problems. There are a lot of programs. We have also a Women's Center that serves women, conducts nutrition classes, bringing learning skills, child preparation. A lot of that.

I said I would talk about some aspects of what people bring to us - mainly language issues. For example, as mentioned, someone came from Barron, Wisconsin to us at one time. He had an accident at work, and he was disabled somewhat. So when he tried to get worker's compensation or something, he couldn't get it. They said you had a prior condition of high blood pressure, and this was history. We tried to connect him to lawyers, and went nowhere. Some background to this is that when people are fired, some people might have been working at the place for ten years, and they will get fired, and at times they will seek unemployment. But sometimes they will be denied because the employer will say they did something wrong. And usually, sometimes it's just something simple.

I have worked at one time with a woman who was a cashier at a store. And she did this for, I don't know, nine years. And then she was accused of taking three dollars that she said was a tip. Instead of putting it into the cash box, she put it in her pocket, or something like that.

There are other cases we see where police brutality happens. And if you go to Minnesota, Minneapolis Civic Center, most people are having problems with traffic tickets, Somalis. You would be amazed by anything you see there, like 10, 20 people sitting there.

Other Specific Challenges and Responses

Presenters at the community forum discussed many specific issues that the Somali community faced in Barron. Not surprisingly given the large portion of Somalis who are younger

in age in Barron, many of the issues were school-related. However, considerable issues arose around housing as well.

**Roger Rivard, Wisconsin State Representative
75th Assembly District**

I got involved in this, actually inadvertently, through the real estate business when Jennie-O was still Jerome Foods. They had some issues with bringing Mexican immigrants up here to work in their plant because they needed the employees. One of the biggest things then was housing. I got brought into that to find housing for those workers. At that point, that was their only issue. If we can find housing, we are okay. They didn't understand how deep the issue was, either. We can find them housing, give them a job, we are all done. As we have pointed out today, they are far from done. I see that changing now where even Jennie-O Foods is being more proactive, understanding there are more issues than housing and getting a job.

**Osman Mosse, Director
Barron Somali Community Association**

- School Problems

Since the 2001 until 2004, there was many different problems we have with students at school; fighting, our community with other communities. Step by step, that situation got better, by helping each other: the Barron Somali Community Council and the school, high school and middle school and the administration.

- Housing Problem

We used to have housing problems, and it was very hard to get an apartment in Barron, except for only one special area of apartment buildings, where most of Somalians live, used to live and still live. They live in same area, but now we have opportunity to rent anywhere in the Barron, downtown Barron or any area, as well as the Barron community. They figure out that Somali community, they are working people, paying tax, paying the rent all the time. Then they accept us, and now we are in better situation.

- Higher Education Barrier

Most of the students, when they graduate from the high school, 99 percent used to keep working at the factory of Jennie-O Turkey Store. That was zero percent true, to go higher education or college or university. But now, we do have many students going to the college. Last year there were two students from the Somalian community who graduated from the college. That is the first graduation in Barron County for Somalis. That is very good progress that we have in Barron.

- Language Issues

Barron Somali community has 13 members meeting every other Sunday. We try to help our community. Most of the problems facing the community are language barriers, especially an English language. There are ESL classes, but the people attending that class is very low. That is why we request from Jennie-O Turkey Store to encourage their employees to attend that ESL classes, and still we are waiting for them to respond if they accept that request. Because we are hoping, if the company encourages the employees to attend the class and learn the English language, they will [more likely] do it.

The other proposal we have, we have asked it in two months and still we are hoping to happen, is to teach the Somalian community the Somalian language. If somebody doesn't know

his own language, it is very hard to learn a different language. We have elders, and they don't know Somalian language well enough to know how to read or write. We have Somali youth, and especially Somali youth who were born and raised in America, who cannot read or write Somali language. We passed that proposal, and we are hoping to get it passed.

Also not only for Somali in Barron Somali community, but we are thinking that we help all Somalian, wherever they are, to learn how to read and write Somali language because the most important thing is if they read their history, their culture, it will help them to stay away from many things they are doing now.

- Citizenship Exam

Also Barron Somali community has difficulty learning hundreds of questions for citizenship to pass the history, culture, and Constitution in America. The hundred questions is very hard for somebody who has no any English language. We have only one Somalian person who passed that test last month with no reading and writing English or Somali. But he learned automatically. If you ask him the question, he answered the right answer. But it took him a long time to learn, four months; but he passed the test.

Monti Hallberg

Barron Area School District Administrator

- Teaching ESL

We had to retool our schools. We had to hire E.S.L. teachers. We had to hire ESL aides. We had to hire bilingual aides. We had to teach our teachers what to do when they have a student in their classroom that doesn't speak English.

So we had somebody come in and train our teachers. I remember one of the lessons they gave us was teaching a lesson on the heart, but they did it all in Spanish. And I was sitting in the back of the room watching a hundred and some teachers, and some of the teachers knew Spanish; but they did the presentation in Spanish, and then they had a little quiz at the end. As they are starting in the back of the room, there are 120 teachers, and all 120 had a pencil and paper to start with. After about 20 seconds, about 30 of them dropped their pencil. And in about two minutes, another 50 dropped their pencils. It was a great lesson, because it put them in the shoes of a Somalian student coming into our class and not understanding English, and what we had to do. So they gave us some tools on what to do to modify the lessons, to use more illustrations, to look at one on one teaching, to hire bilingual aides. We had to retool our schools.

- School Performance

The question is whether we have seen improvement in the testing results that we have from our Somalian students that we have on test scores. The answer to that question is yes, we have. What we did have before, probably 95 percent of our Somali population was at the high school. What we are seeing is now we have elementary students starting early on. We have probably ten elementary students now, another ten middle school students, and 50 or 60 in the high school. So what we are seeing is we are getting better as instructors. Our teachers have grown tremendously in their awareness of what it's like to be a student that doesn't speak English as a first language, and that's helped. I think we are becoming better educators. But also the Somalis are assimilating into our school system. And I think that's really made a difference, but we have seen some improvement.

- High School Graduation Issue

I think we have students that come to us without any formal education, and they are coming to us in their Junior and Senior year without any credits. What we do is we try to get them as far along as possible, assimilated to the country. We have different levels of English. We get them that far, and then we turn them to the high school equivalency diploma, and they provide training at the technical college, trying to get them a high school diploma through that process. Some of them will have the credits when they come to us, but their English levels are really minimal. And they will receive a diploma from us, and they will have a difficult time in the colleges unless the colleges have a great ESL program to assist them. Some of the higher end programs, they were not equipped with ESL assistance, as they go to college, especially locally around Barron.

Abdi Si Taar Doon
Barron Resident

They struggled a lot in terms of rent. As my colleague said, they had some issues in the Barron High School, but now since the community has their soccer competition, those things are disappearing and we are just getting more accepted than we used to do before.

Challenge and Response: Daycare

Although the Committee heard numerous issues facing the Somali community in Barron, one issue consumed a significant amount of time during the community forum: daycare. Two issues were identified under this rubric. First, Somalis in Barron faced challenges finding quality and affordable daycare services for Somali children. The second issue involved the desire of some Somali women to provide daycare services to other Somali families, but they were prohibited from doing so because of their lack of credentialing or inability to meet state regulations for daycare facilities. Daycare was important because it brought up discussions of the need for both parents to work, the language and cultural issues that Somali children confront in other daycare facilities, and government regulations that required Somalis who wanted to open their own daycare businesses to be licensed. Committee member Rebecca Grassl-Bradley may have captured the sentiments of most presenters best when she stated,

The one thing I would question is when you are talking about one member of a family taking care of a child from another member of a family. That goes on every day. It goes on in the white community, Hispanic community, and I would assume it's going on in the Somali community. That is a good, good answer, but the problem is when you start getting the numbers up there with four and five and six children in a home, then you run into issues. That's a safety issue both from the government level and from the personal level. It is a safety issue.

So where is that fine line, you know? If it were up to me, I would relax regulations. But then again, as soon as we do that and there is a problem, then you have to pay. Then they are going to come back with even worse regulations. So that's a slippery slope to go down. I guess my suggestion is to continue with what everybody else is doing.

Mohamed Dirie, President
Barron Somali Community Association

First, the big problem [with daycare] that we have is lack of service. Within the community, we have families that have kids where the dad and the mom are working full time, first shift and second shift. They don't have child care or a child care center. They don't have anybody to help them. Either the mom or the father are watching the kids. If something happened to a kid, one of the kids, and they have an appointment or they need to take them to the school, they don't have no one else to watch their kids for them because the mom is at work or the dad is at work.

The big problem we have is that it is important to the community to have one of their people or, especially the mothers who have kids, to be, the prime person to go there for care. But the problem they face with this is lack of language. In the states, if you want to have a child care center where you take care of the kids, you have to be a certified - I am guessing through the state. And that kind of puts a lot of pressure on them because of their English language challenges.

But, they have been doing this kind of child care since they were like nine years old, taking care of their young ones or their kids, they have the ability to do it; but legally, they can't. They can't just run their own place without their certification or going to school.

So if we can just have a program for them that makes it easy on them to go to school and get that certification, that would be great. Well, still they need help with the language, but if we can have someone that can translate and pretty much can go to class with them to help them make it easier for them, that would be great.

**Saeed Fahia, Executive Director
Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota**

What is available in Minneapolis, many Somali mothers who babysit their children do child care for other parents through the state system, what they call Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Grant Program, and they get certification. They go through classes. They can only take in so many kids, maybe four or five, and they are paid through that.

They have to know some English, if something happens so they can call 911 and speak to someone and tell them what happened. So there is some legalese involved. In our agency, we do have a day care, but it's kind of different. It's attached to English as a second language (ESL) program. We found that many mothers have lot of children. They can't learn English, and they can't find work because they have to take care of all these children.

Within the Somali communities, there are trust issues also that you can leave your child with your mother or friend, but they don't take them to ordinary child care centers. So in our case, what we did was we started an ESL program, and it's called the East African Women's Center. So it's legally unlicensed, but it means that we only take in children of those parents who are in the ESL program and while they are in the program. They are in ESL program for three hours. Another thing with the E. S. L. Program, is that the mothers who are going to it usually are within the block. It cannot be like they take a bus and go to the ESL program. So if anything happens with the child, the mother will be called and be there in moments.

And some of the expenses of that is paid through foundation money, and some of it is paid through -- and the kids are from zero to four years old - some of it is paid through C-CAP, what they call Child Care Assistance Program. So the value of this is that there is early childhood education in the program. We have to train two Somalis to become assistant teachers to work in the program and get some certification. We also collaborate with the University of Minnesota to

send in teachers who educate the kids in early childhood education, then they assist them also with about a month of tests, too.

**Roger Rivard, Wisconsin State Representative
75th Assembly District**

The federal government, I find it hard to believe, does not have – I don't find it hard to believe - but probably does not have a program for the Somali community. But there probably is something out there, and that may be worth looking into. I actually own a building in Rice Lake, and it is leased to United Migrant Services Organization, which it's actually a day care building at this time and has small toilets in it and everything. It's full of students from the Mexican community, Spanish-speaking community, and that's federally funded.

I would assume there is funding out there, that there is probably funding out there for other communities coming from outside the United States. There may be federal funds available for that. I know there are for the Spanish-speaking community right now.

**Robert Missling, President
Barron County Economic Development Corp.**

If I learned anything today, and I can't begin to speak what these guys have done, but Barron County Economic Development is here to help. And if the needs are day care, I think we can work and help in those common areas that we should help. I know Barron has a Boys and Girls Club that meets at Riverview, which must be of some help to you, and I have had some contact with a gal at Work Force Development out of Menomonie, and I think she comes up to Barron.

**Osman Mosse, Director
Somali Community of Barron, WI**

We took that to the Diversity Council meeting and then the Work Force Resource. They tried to solve this problem, and they applied for grants. They requested the International Center to give training to somebody, females. And they ask us to bring ten Somalian females [to receive] training in English. And we did give that list to the Work Force. They are working on it, I'm sure, but it takes a long time, now about two years and a half. We are waiting to hear from them.

**Monti Hallberg
Barron Area School District Administrator**

We have started a day care in one of our elementary schools. We have three elementary schools, but this one is located 16 miles south of Barron. It's not really in the city of Barron. It's self-funding; it's a break-even program. We are not charging high costs. We are at cost, or a little bit less. We did it in our Ridgeland community because they didn't have a day care facility there.

We thought about it in Barron. We thought about it in our other school communities, but the day care businesses came in and met with me and said, "You are going to run us out of

business if you open up a day care.” There are about seven or eight, probably 15 people employed by that. We'll put them out of business if we did that.

So what we did is we met with them, and we work with them and make it as seamless as possible. We would provide bus transportation to and from school. We were only looking at school-age children. We are not looking at children of ages one, two, three; basically, at the ages of four and up, that we would look at.

I think Mohamed has a great point. In order for this to be attractive toward the Somalian community, we have to have at least some Somalian employees in the day care. I think that's going to be [hard] because of the language barriers, cultural differences, and finally the cost. The cost is prohibitive. Costs of day care are expensive these days. We are talking about \$150 a week, at least; and to take your child to day care and make wages at \$10 or \$11 an hour, it takes a big chunk. Financial assistance would be another part.

**David Vruwink, Mayor
City of Barron**

Just [comparing daycare] to the driver education, we have this problem - the transition from the classroom, to getting the permit, and then the license. Right now, I have several Somalian students in my classroom, and we are trying to get a permit. I am working with the ESL teacher in getting past those barriers, but there are regulations. And I know sometimes I have some problems with some students who say, “Why do we have to do it this way?” Well, this is the requirement the Department of Transportation says all of us have to do. And of course, with safety on the highway and so on, but we will with these students, and we have made that transition with most of them where we had to give them a little extra help, make them understand the rules, getting out there on the highway so that they are safe – not only their safety is involved, but everybody that shares the road with them as well.

So it sometimes takes a little bit extra effort to do that, but we can get over most of those barriers [with daycare facilities].

Recommendations of Presenters

**Cawo Abdi, Professor of Sociology
University of Minnesota**

How do you bring about unity of these two communities who feel that they are alien to each other, that they are distant from each other, and this has to be work that is done on both ends? So finding cultural brokers that can educate local communities about experiences and the history that Dr. Kusow has already outlined regarding who are these people, where are they coming from, what are the forces that brought them to the Midwest in the U.S.

But Somalis also are coming from dictatorial regime where government and institutions are distrusted, where you associate corruption and abuse of power to government institutions. So there has to be an education of what it means to be an American citizen, what it means to be an American resident in terms of both the privileges that come with it but also the obligations and the responsibilities that come with it.

So I think there needs to be a basic groundwork that has to be done on both ends. And of course, that requires resources; and I understand that small towns often times are very stressed in terms of finding the resources necessary.

**Saeed Fahia, Executive Director
Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota**

I will say that the most important thing is to teach people to understand the system, to be able to integrate into the community and the society, and also to learn how to take advantage of opportunities that are there. And I would say personally that a lot of people have been successful in working and going to school.

**Mohamed Dirie, President
Barron Somali Community Association**

The most important thing that we need to have for the kids that are growing up right now, who are in the middle school or high school or even in elementary, we need better services for them; summer programs, something they can do in the wintertime, after school activities, pretty much some kind of help for the little ones. And I guess that would be great if we have that kind of help.

**Roger Rivard, Wisconsin State Representative
75th Assembly District**

There was mention that there is a need for some of these resources. The State of Wisconsin has those resources. I was flabbergasted by the amount of resources we actually have in the State of Wisconsin. We probably have too many resources because we spent ourselves into oblivion. They are there, they are within our budget now, and they are available. If there is any need on the local level, whether city or county or any other organization, including the Somali community, contact me. If there are state resources available, I will be happy to do that.

**David Vruwink, Mayor
City of Barron**

This is news today for me. It is good for me [to hear] about the day care and some of the issues we should be addressing. In your every-day job as mayor or in education, sometimes we don't think about these things. There are many issues we are dealing with, but these are very, very important issues. And certainly, I will take those to heart and go back and try to work as well as we possibly can.

We need more of that. We need more dialogue back and forth to understand each other because God made us all, and we all are equal. We don't judge. But as I said before, I lived in Barron almost all my life. I worked with the Somalian community in both education and now as mayor, and I have an excellent working relationship. I enjoy when they come to my office, and we talk back and forth and work back and forth together.

So I welcome the Somalian community. They have done a lot for Barron, a lot for teaching our community about multi-culturalism. I love their food. I know that in the ESL class

every year there are several times when they bring food of their culture, and I could be there all day eating, which I don't need but enjoy.

Monti Hallberg

Barron Area School District Administrator

[Barron] is a great, great community. If there are two things or three things that I would like to recommend for other communities, it would be to have a system set up in your community for transition of immigrants coming to you. You have to be careful. It's difficult because, as I look around the world, there are a hundred and fifty different cultures that you have to prepare for. You don't know who is going to be landing on your door step. But I think if you have the system down there, and then you investigate the cultures, and you have those cultures, have a system set up so you can educate your local population, you can educate the visitors coming in.

I think it was really spoken well that the Somalians didn't understand the Barron culture, and the Barron culture didn't understand the Somali culture. It's a two-way street of educating. I think that would be the number one, the number one thing I think we could do to help our students.

Obviously, education; the Somalians have been a great addition to our school. We have had very few discipline problems over the last ten years. They understand that their ticket for success in this country is education. Not all of our students understand that, but the Somalian community is very much aware that education is important. So they have been a great addition to our school. We certainly enjoy having them there.

COMMITTEE CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an independent, bipartisan agency of the federal government charged with studying discrimination or denials of equal protection on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, or national origin. In each of the 50 states, an Advisory Committee has been established made up of responsible persons who serve without compensation to advise the Commission of relevant information concerning its respective state on matters within the jurisdiction of the Commission.

To ensure its independence and bipartisanship, the Wisconsin Advisory Committee is constituted to include individuals representing both major political parties, a broad spectrum of political philosophies, different geographic regions of the state, and different occupations. It is independent of any national, state, or local administration, political organization, or advocacy group.

The observations and conclusions presented here include the presenters' recommendations in the previous section and are derived from the presenters' statements during the forum regarding the Somali community of Barron. However, the Committee believes lessons can be learned in Barron that should easily transfer to other, particularly rural, communities that may experience an influx of immigrant laborers in the future.

Overcoming Cultural Barriers

1. Education. It was clear from the community forum that education is a two-way street. Immigrants need to learn about the community they are entering; the community needs to learn about the immigrants and their culture, religion, etc. The Barron political leadership and the Somali community leadership should continue and accelerate efforts to host cultural events, particularly around local holiday celebrations and events.
2. Intentional dialogue. The community forum produced a lot of points of learning for Barron officials and the Somali participants. Conducting this type of dialogue regularly would help educate all parties and prevent future issues from becoming major obstacles. The Somali community and the political leadership of Barron need to work together and organize issue meetings where particular issues can be discussed thoroughly.
3. Play soccer. For the Somali youth who came to Barron after their early childhood years, playing soccer was something that was already ingrained in them, as it is the major international sport. Many presenters identified Monti Hallberg's decision to start a soccer team in Barron schools as the watershed moment towards the Somali students and other students of Barron bridging the cultural divide that kept them apart.
4. Teach English as a Second Language (ESL). The Barron School District acted quickly to provide language assistance services to Somali students so that they could more easily learn English and integrate into the Barron schools. As the school acted quickly, Barron leadership and the major employer of Somalis in Barron, Jennie-O Turkey Store, needed to implement an ESL program so that Somali adults could also learn English and more easily transition themselves into the Barron community.

Political Empowerment

1. Register and Vote. Somalis need to register and vote. Unless members of the Somali communities register and vote in substantial numbers, they will be relegated to accepting the mandates of those who do vote.
2. Create Agenda. Somalis must define issues and agree upon common goals. These issues should be set for different levels of government and that integrate the interests of other immigrant groups.
3. Coalition Building. Somalis in Barron should work at building coalitions with other immigrant groups in Western Wisconsin who may share similar concerns, including the Hmong and Latino immigrant communities.

Daycare

1. Work with Barron political and business leaders. At the community forum, political and business leaders of Barron offered their support to the Somali community. The Somali community should take advantage of this offer and take the leadership role in setting up the meeting and process these discussions should take.
2. Partner with Existing Daycares. Business and political leaders of Barron should assist the Somali community in facilitating discussions with existing daycare providers in Barron. It is possible that win-win scenarios could develop if dialogue is begun to understand concerns of all involved.

Federal Action

1. Anticipate and prepare for asylum seekers. The U.S. State Department should be proactive in predicting from where the next influx of immigrants may come. The exercise might be important particularly as it relates to conflicts where the U.S. has been directly or indirectly involved.
2. Identify host communities. Diverse agencies within the U.S. government should be engaged in finding communities that are most appropriate for new immigrant communities either because of economic factors such as labor market, or other factors such as the likelihood that the immigrant community will be able to assimilate easily.
3. Prepare host communities. Diverse agencies within the U.S. government, working with state and local governments, need to do a better job in preparing communities who might become hosts for transitioning immigrants into their local communities. This may include the creation of a resource center for the benefit of members of the immigrant community to find important information such as on housing, social services, daycare services, training, employment, and local volunteer opportunities.
4. Prepare immigrants. Asylum seekers like the Somalis of Barron often believe they will soon return to their native countries. Unfortunately, it often takes generations for these nations to heal well enough for asylum seekers to return home. The U.S. Customs and Immigration Services within the Department of Homeland Security should prepare asylum seekers to think long term

about their immigrant status, about assimilation, and about helping themselves and their children plan for a better future of coexistence with their host communities.

APPENDIX



July 27, 2012

David Mussatt, Ph.D., J.D.
US States Commission on Civil Rights
Midwest Regional Office
Xerox Centre, Suite 410
55 West Monroe Street
Chicago, IL 60606

*Send via First Class Mail
and also by email to
dmussatt@usccr.gov*

Dear Sir:

I received your draft report on the status of the Somali community in Barron, Wisconsin. I would like to take the opportunity to provide you with information to include in your report. The statement is attached and can be attributed to me for publication.

Sincerely,

JENNIE-O TURKEY STORE, INC.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Jm" or "Jeremy Miller", written over the printed name.

Jeremy Miller
Human Resources Manager

Jennie-O Turkey Store, Inc.

34 North 7th Street Barron, WI 54812 (715) 537-3131



July 27, 2012

**RESPONSE TO THE US CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION
JEREMY MILLER, HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER
JENNIE-O TURKEY STORE, INC.**

Employees at the Jennie-O Turkey Store Barron plant come from a variety of backgrounds and ethnic origins.

Embracing all of the ways in which we are different — beyond race and gender — fosters innovation and cultivates an environment in which people aspire to work and build long-term careers. The Jennie-O Turkey Store charter states that "Team members' diverse backgrounds are understood and appreciated."

Jennie-O Turkey Store has a history of working with its diverse workforce in many ways. For example:

- The company has had a representative from its Human Resources Department on the community's Diversity Council since it was established in Barron, Wis.
- Bilingual trainers have been a part of our training department staff since Somali employees began employment at the Barron plant.
- An employee liaison position was established in 2002 to translate for employees and assist them in a variety of other areas such as making medical appointments, translating for bank appointments, school appointments, landlords, etc. We currently have two employee liaisons (one on the day shift and one on second shift) who are both bilingual in English and Somali..
- Jennie-O Turkey Store has held on-site English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and we share information regarding community classes when we are informed that they are being held. (We have not been approached internally or externally about offering ESL classes since the International Center in Barron was established and assumed the role of offering ESL classes.)

Jennie-O Turkey Store, Inc.

34 North 7th Street Barron, WI 54812 (715) 537-3131

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**RESPONSE TO THE US CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION
JEREMY MILLER, HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER
JENNIE-O TURKEY STORE, INC.**

- Company materials and information are often translated into multiple languages – including Somali – to ensure a better understanding among employees. Examples include employee handbooks, the company newsletter and benefits information, among others.
- In 2001/2002, one of our management team members helped develop and participated in a diversity video as part of a community project for Leadership Barron County.
- We are respectful of religious accommodations in our workplace, and we have made accommodations to allow for activities such as prayer breaks and time off for Id Al Fitr at the end of Ramadan.

Jennie-O Turkey Store is an equal opportunity employer and provides a good place to work. We offer competitive industry wages and an excellent benefits package (health, dental, life, disability, retirement, paid holidays and paid vacation, just to name a few). We believe in working with our employees directly to address their concerns and listen to their ideas.