

News

Immigrants get help with transition

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Speaking before a crowd of Rochester's newest immigrants seated in a classroom decorated with world maps and posters with interview tips, Karri Blair outlined the latest job opportunity.

Swift & Co. meat processing plant in Worthington, Minn., is looking for workers after a recent illegal immigration raid and \$500 in moving costs are available. She notes that moving would cause some challenges — like finding housing, child care and making sure social services are transferred. But Blair assured the students that the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Agency would be committed to helping anyone who decides take a job there.

"If we just give you a job and send you over there, you are not going to be successful," said Blair, IMAA's employee services program manager.

State data shows that Somali and Asian immigrants have made steady progress when it comes to getting off welfare.

For instance, Somalis on welfare in 1999 had a self-support index of 30 percent. The index comes from looking at a group of families receiving welfare during a particular quarter and checks on those same families three years later. Success is measured by individuals moving off welfare or working more than 30 hours a week.

In 1999, Somalis receiving welfare in Minnesota had a success rate of 30 percent compared with 75 percent in 2006.

A warm welcome

While the report does not address why these immigrants seem to be



Ken Klotzbach/Post-Bulletin

Employee Services program manager Karri Blair talks to a class of recent immigrants about work force training at the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association.

doing so well in moving off welfare, some credit organizations like IMAA with making the difference. The goal of IMAA is to provide a one-stop-shop for immigrants trying to start their new lives in Minnesota, Blair said. All immigrants are assigned bilingual caseworkers charged with making sure they get the education, job training, health care and social support necessary to succeed.

"We are the only one that communicates with everybody and tries to pull it all together," Blair said.

Khalid Samatar is among IMAA's newest clients. He moved to Rochester with his parents and sister in September after fleeing the violence in his home country of Somalia. Since arriving, the 20-year-old has been studying English with hopes of finding a good job.



Samatar

"I want to be a dedicated person," he said. "I want to get a job."

Also fueling Somalis' success in Olmsted County may be a push launched in the mid-1990s to help these refugees acclimate to life in Minnesota, said Mina Wilson, director of Olmsted County's Family Support and Assistance. She said special federal grants were available to fund English classes, education and job training.

Abdifatah Adbinur says there is another key to Somali success: the strong sense of community among Somalis. When he and his family immigrated to Rochester in 1995, he said they relied on fellow Somali immigrants to give them rides to the grocery store, translate English and help them navigate a new culture.

Getting off welfare

The success rate is based on the Minnesota Family Investment Program's (MFIP) self-support index which defines success as adults no longer receiving welfare support after three years or if they are working an average of 30 or more hours per week. This report includes adults eligible for MFIP in January through March of 2003.

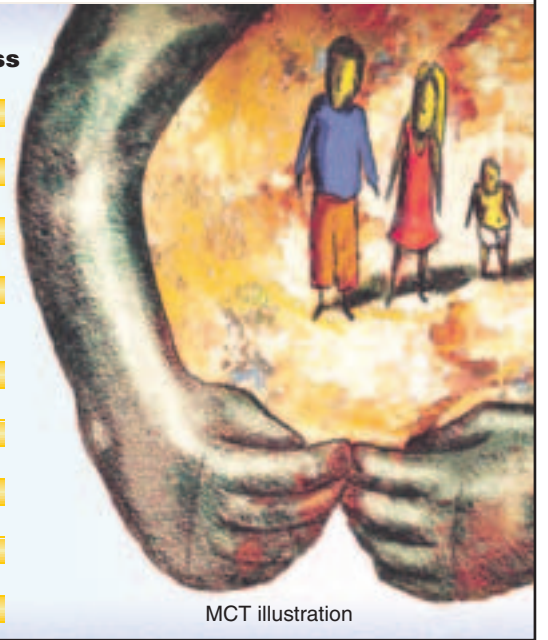
OLMSTED COUNTY

Race	Number of adults	Success rate
African American	161	72.7%
Non-Somali black immigrant	49	61.2%
Somali	241	83.4%
Non-Hmong Asian	87	86.2%
Hispanic	60	80%
White	432	79.2%
Olmsted County total	1,046	78.9%

MINNESOTA

American Indian	4,347	58.4%
African American	11,277	58.3%
Non-Somali Black Immigrant	978	76.2%
Somali	2,488	75%
Non-Hmong Asian	1,153	79%
Hmong	1,558	75.7%
Hispanic	2,898	77.5%
White	24,140	77.7%
Minnesota total	49,392	71.3%

Source: Minnesota Department of Human Services



MCT illustration

P-B graphic

"We're open-hearted people," Abdinur said.

Helping others

But while Somalis have made strong progress, other ethnic and racial groups have lagged behind. In particular, U.S.-born blacks and American Indians have struggled to move off assistance. Welfare reform's five-year limit on benefits has heightened the urgency at finding a solution for helping these groups success.

Two years ago, Olmsted County teamed up with other community organizations to launch Project Hope. The program is targeted at

U.S.-born blacks and aimed at helping them get the education and job skills necessary to get off welfare.

So far, it appears to be working. Mina Wilson, director of Olmsted County's Family Support and Assistance, said that since starting the program two years ago, the county has seen success rates increase by 10 percentage points. The project partners include the county Family Services of Rochester, Rochester public schools and Express Personnel Services.

Julie Nigon is one of the people focused on helping these residents succeed.

"We work with them to find out their employment goals and how we can help them with their skills so they can get a job," said Nigon, program manager for Hawthorne Education Center's Adult and Family Literacy Program.

Since Project Hope began, she said, six students have earned GEDs, four have almost completed their GEDs, one has earned a high school diploma, and six have gotten jobs.

"They are meeting with a great deal of success," Nigon said. "Our number of completions have been very good. It has been intense, and that is what was needed."