

# Somalis succeed in moving off welfare

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When Abdifatah Adbinur and his family immigrated to Rochester in 1995, the Somali teenager spoke no English and had never seen snow.

During the first year, his family received public assistance, and Adbinur said he can still remember the “embarrassment” of having to use food stamps.

“Somali men and women like to be independent,” Adbinur said.

Twelve years later, the 28-year-old speaks fluent English, is pursuing a degree at Rochester Community and Technical College and works full time as a staff organizer for Local 21 union.

“All these experiences you have definitely motivate you,” he said. “You can’t lay back and say it’s going to be OK.”

Research by state officials shows that Somali immigrants have made big strides since 2000 in moving off welfare.

A report examined families on welfare in the first quarter of 2003 and checked back with those families three years later. It found that 75 percent of Somalis statewide had either moved off welfare or were working more than 30 hours a week. The numbers in Olmsted County are even higher, with more than 83 percent of Somalis considered successful.

“Somalis are coming in with significant barriers, so the fact that they are becoming self-sufficient is a testament to their determination,” said Kristy Arend, development director for the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association, a Rochester nonprofit agency that assists immigrants.

Other racial and ethnic groups also

have scored high in Olmsted County, including Hispanics and non-Hmong Asians.

But the study also highlights the struggles of other racial and ethnic groups to move off welfare. Statewide, success rates for U.S.-born blacks and American Indians hover at 58 percent. In Olmsted County, U.S.-born blacks have achieved a 73 percent success rate, but that still does not meet state goals. As a result, Olmsted County is one of 16 statewide charged with boosting those numbers.

And the clock is ticking for Olmsted County to increase work performance rates among welfare recipients. If Minnesota does not increase the number of welfare recipients spending at least

30 hours per week in jobs or job-related programs by 2009, the state could lose \$13.5 million, which could lead to funding cuts in Olmsted County.

To tackle these discrepancies, Olmsted County has teamed up with other organizations to launch Project Hope, said Mina Wilson, director of Olmsted County’s Family Support and Assistance. She said Project Hope aims to provide U.S.-born black welfare recipients with the education and job skills training they need to succeed.

“Each population and each group has different characteristics. They bring different skills and different barriers,” Wilson said. “That’s what we have to look at.”



Abdinur

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