

Somali youth seek solutions

Written by Abeni Hill
Sunday, 22 July 2012 00:00



The Somali American Youth Conference created a space for Ka Joog Nonprofit Organization members, local youth leaders, and community organizers to voice their concerns and solutions before representatives from the local government and the Department of Homeland Security. Photo by Alexandra Newell.

Somali youth are coming together to find solutions for the issues their communities face in Minnesota, specifically in Minneapolis.

The Somali American Youth Conference was held on Sat. Jul. 14 at Augsburg College by the nonprofit organization, Ka Joog. Ka Joog, 2625 East Franklin Ave. Ste. LL-7, is a Minneapolis-based non-profit seeking to better many different aspects of the Somali community. One of the discussion topics was gang violence.

"Gangs in the Somali community aren't territorial," said Sgt. Derwin Ellis of the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office. "They are mobile."

Ellis said there is a lack of communication between law enforcement and the Somali community. He said he believes one of the reasons is because the Somali people do not understand the American justice system. He told a story relating to the Seward killings, where

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three men were killed at the Seward Market in January 2010. There was a juvenile suspect in custody and Ellis said there were about 200 people in the court calling him a murderer. He tried to explain to them that the suspect is innocent until proven guilty and has rights to a trial and a lawyer.

Ellis also works as a community liaison for minorities in Hennepin County and works mostly on the Northside. He works with Latinos, African-Americans, Native Americans as well as Somalis.

Ellis said there should be more accommodations for gang members who practice Islam.

"I break up my agenda around prayer time," said Ellis.

Ellis also said he has noticed halfway houses and group homes for gang members are not very inclusive, not providing different meals for Muslim diets as well as meal preparation for Ramadan.

Although law enforcement can take part in preventing or minimizing gang violence, some forum participants also said parents and educators can play a key role.

"Everything starts at home", said Eden Prairie Ka Joog member Omar Mohamed. Mohamed also talked about the lack of role models in the Somali community. "We don't see the college graduates. All we see are the hustlers."

"Parents need to learn the system," said Ka Joog member Anquam Mahamoud. Mahamoud also said parents raise boys and girls in distinctly different ways. "Young women have more

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responsibility at home while when young men come home and the parents say 'you can do what you like.'"

Mahamoud said some young Somali men did not have structure when they were raised. "When you get older, they (the parents) want you to become men."

Some participants said that back in Somalia many people suffered and were oppressed under police brutality.

"The Somali people are afraid of law enforcement," said Youth Leadership Development Coordinator of Somali Action Alliance Hindia Ali.

Another issue that was brought up was the no-snitching policy. Members of the Somali community fear retaliation from gang members if they tell the police they witnessed a crime.

"One person does something, no one is going to talk," said Mohamed.

Ali said there was a program to protect people who gave law enforcement information about crimes, but it is underfunded.

"We are asking people to speak out, but it is still quiet," said Ellis.

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Most gang members are male and between the ages of 17 and 25. There is belief that young people in the Somali community might not want to listen to their elders.

"There is still a disconnection between the elders and the youth," said Ka Joog Director of Operations Abdimalik Mohamed.

One solution that was suggested was for peer mentors.

"Youth should talk to youth," said Mohamed. "I have talked to a gang member and we saw eye to eye."

Mohamed also said we should not treat gang members as a problem.

"We need to get to know them as who they are as people," said Mohamed. "If we don't treat them as people, they can't treat us as people."

Other topics discussed at the conference were health disparities and lack of economic and educational opportunities.

For more information about the issues facing the Somali community or about Ka Joog, visit <http://www.kajoog.org/>