**Somali Advocacy for Family Empowerment**

**(SAFE) Initiative**

1. **Organizational overview:**

In 1988, when full-scale civil war began in Northern Somalia and later in 1991 in Southern Somalia, millions of people were forced to flee from their homes to the neighboring states of Ethiopia, Jabuuti and Kenya. In response, the U.S. Government settled thousands of Somalis in the U.S. through its refugee resettlement program.

For 20 years, the Somali Development Center (SDC) has been the lifeline and a vital educational and social services resource for Massachusetts’s growing Somali refugee and immigrant community. Headquartered in Boston, SDC was founded in 1996 by a dedicated group of Somali-Americans, including the current Executive Director, who originally came to the U.S. to obtain higher education. SDC was specifically established by this group of Somali Immigrants to provide multiple services to Somali newcomers, as there were no effective mainstream social services agencies working with Somalis at that time. The founding members remain actively involved in SDC activities through membership in the Board of Trustees. The dedicated staff at the Somali Development Center includes a diverse array of individuals who share a deep commitment to issues of concern to the Somali community. As such, SDC is uniquely positioned to address the highly complex culture-specific needs of the Somali population.

**Mission**

The mission of Somali Development Center is to provide consistent, excellent, and accessible community services to all Somalis (and other African communities) in New England, regardless of immigration status. These services help Somalis in Massachusetts to obtain basic resources, services, information and skills. While strengthening the Somali community by promoting mutual assistance, cultural identity, and leadership, SDC fosters the ability of Somali individuals and families to advocate on their own behalf and participate constructively in the larger community.

SDC has gradually expanded its services and offices to meet the ever-growing needs of the community. Though SDC still remains headquartered in Boston, it had in years between 2005 – 2014 established regional offices in Chelsea, Springfield, Massachusetts and Manchester, New Hampshire. Currently a total of twelve staff and volunteers work for SDC on a full time & part time basis. The majority of SDC staff are bilingual and bicultural.

1. **Focus Areas:**

The Somali Development Center (SDC) is proposing to launch a P.E.A.C.E. project through an Initiative entitled: **S**omali **A**dvocacy for **F**amily **E**mpowerment (SAFE), which is (a) designed to convene a diverse group of influential Somali leaders: religious, business, non-profit and cultural leaders, to address social issues in their ethnic communities; specifically, those that adversely impact our community and diminish their opportunities for social upward mobility. Such issues include but are not limited to:

(1) Harmful cultural practices (e.g.: female genital mutilation); (2) Obstacles to the development of women and girls; and (3) The lack of opportunities for immigrant and refugee youth.

(b) SAFE aims to promote resilience by strengthening protective factors within the Somali community. These factors include:

1. Social Support;
2. Social Cohesion;
3. Integrated cultural identity;
4. Employment success;

SAFE will also take a strategic approach to addressing long-term stubborn issues that require on-going collective effort to address. This approach is critical to the long-term success of the Somali community because there are no existing entities convened to assess the community’s needs, progress and future, while taking the issues of women and youth into account.

The Goal of SAFE is***: “****To develop primary prevention strategies, collaborations, meetings and trainings that foster: prosocial behavior, acceptance, tolerance, effective self-advocacy skills and peer leadership skills, critical thinking and conflict resolution skills, generalized programs of education against Violence, informed and inclusive communities, cross-cultural learning, empowerment, and/or resilience across broad populations.*

1. **Service Needs and Gaps:**

As religious, ethnic, and racial minorities whose pre-existing net worth has been devastated, Somali-Americans are often forced to the outer edges of our society where poverty abounds and livelihoods are threatened by discrimination and inequity. Currently, our teens arenot accessing youth services and are dropping out of school at alarming rates. Our young people struggle to fit into urban America in their everyday life, while also trying to fit into their parent’s cultural expectations. Somali youth, particularly young Somali men, are inundated with mixed messages during their formative years. While their U.S. born or raised peers respect the norms of the post-feminist era, Somali youth often come home to an oppressive environment in which their mothers and sisters are trapped in a traditional role. Unfortunately, this confusion is often manifested in acts of violence against female family members. According to a New York Times (“Joining the Fight in Somalia,” July 12, 2009) more than twenty young Somali-Americans, many of them raised in Minneapolis, have left the United States to join a militant Islamist group in Somalia. “They had fled Somali as small boys, escaping a catastrophic civil war. They came of age as refugees in Minneapolis, embracing basketball and the prom, hip-hop and the Mall of America.” Yet due to the barriers they faced of race, class, religion and language, these students dropped out of college and left Somalia to join the Al-Shabaab, a militant Islamist group affiliated with Al-Qaida & ISIS fighting to overthrow the fragile Somali government. The article continues to say that they “appear to have been motivated by a complex mix of politics and faith, and their communications show how some are trying to recruit other young Americans to their cause.”

To prevent this from occurring within the Somali youth population, the Somali Development Center wants to be the moral authority in our community, not radical entities. Currently, our teens are not accessing youth services and are dropping out of school at alarming rates. To avoid discontent, which can lead to vulnerability to fanatical ideology, we want to empower and educate our youth and their families by providing options that will help them feel part of the larger American community and decrease their sense of isolation. By providing our youth with positive options such as gainful employment, we hope to avoid facing the devastating events that have taken place with the Somali youth in Minneapolis.

Moreover, we have noticed over the years that when a Somali mother is working and able to improve her situation, her children follow her lead are more likely to be successful and become well integrated. We have also noticed that when men, and young men, have a role and standing in the community, they are less likely to engage in domestic violence or any other kind of violence.

We believe that if the mother and father are working and respected, their children will see and model this, and become successful. We believe that if the mother or father feels powerless and alienated, their children will see and learn this. They are then more likely to not feel able, to struggle to find opportunities, and to be vulnerable to recruitment by extremists. Violence is a systemic problem, and can be addressed by serving the whole family.

1. **Work Plan**

**Project Overview:**

1. **Social Support.**

In addition to the core services offered by the SDC, SAFE participants will benefit from the SDC’s comprehensive case management support offered by our Social Adjustment Services (SAS); which includes engagement by staff with a strong grasp of how the American legal and immigration system work, and do an excellent job of assisting clients with legal matters and accessing social services. We take a culture -specific approach to serving the men and women enrolled. Trustworthy and an approachable male and female staff ~~will~~ also offer a weekly support group for clients; which makes a significant impact, at a very challenging time in their lives.

Headquartered in Jamaica Plain, SDC was recently selected for the 2016 Best of Jamaica Plain Award, in the Social Services Organization category, by the Jamaica Plain Award Program (<http://www.localawardscenter.org>). Under the SAFE initiative and others, SDC will continue to commit itself to the provision of critical social services to, immigrants, refugees, and new citizens of the United States.

Somali Development Center will steadily continue to outreach and inform individuals about the services we offer. We make announcements at community forums, spread information by word-of-mouth, and send flyers and emails to our partner agencies alerting them of our SAFE start date. The SDC utilizes five key tools to reach out to Somali youth and adults in need of services (e.g. work readiness training etc.):

1. **BPS School-Based Referrals** – SDC partners with the student support staff at 2 Boston Public High Schools (English High and New Comer Academy) who inform youth of our programs and services. We work with student support staff who help distribute flyers and announce our programming opportunities. The majority of our youth, approximately 200, will be reached through this avenue and another 50 youths who may or may not be BPS students will also be recruited to participate in the SAFE program.
2. **Local Media**–SDC places advertisements on local cable and radio shows for Somalis. The SDC will also publicize events, special activities and to invite friends and partners to spread the word about SAFE initiative.
3. **Community Partner Referrals** – SDC will informs it partner agencies about the SAFE start dates. They will in turn inform families who are in need of our services (Whittier Street Health Center, English High School, New Comer Academy, Roxbury Community College, Bunker Hill Community College, Job Net, Boston Career Link, The Local Mosques.)

1. **Special Events** - In partnership with several community based organizations, the SDC hosts annual cultural dinners and celebrations. These events highlight the SDC accomplishment and resources that are available for the Somali community. SAFE Program activities will also be announced at these events.
2. **Word of Mouth** - Many of the clients enrolled in the SDC's programs and services, play a great role in getting the word out to other people in need. Currently, the SDC receives an average of **fifteen referrals per quarter** from current clients. In addition, youth enrolled in our RESS programs pass on information to other youth and parents who worship in the same places will play a strong role in the number of people being referred.

1. **Social Cohesion**

SAFE will host quarterly meetings to discuss the social challenges facing the Somali Community in Massachusetts and generate culturally specific approaches to addressing them. SAFE Initiative members will offer expertise in ***religion, economic development,*** ***social services and community engagement***. SAFE leaders will be committed to working jointly to develop effective solutions to key issues that prevent the Somali community from developing optimally in America.

For year one (October 2016 – September 2017) cycle, SAFE endeavors to work on and focus on (1) developing employment opportunities for women, (2) addressing and preventing domestic violence, and (3) protecting youth and preventing youth involvement in violent extremism.

SDC and SAFE leaders will also host an annual statewide conference where Somali men and women can connect to discuss the future of their ethnic community and culture in America.

1. **Integrated cultural identity**

SAFE will engage leaders in a five step process of cultural exploration and progression:

* **Tradition** - Leaders will begin by looking at foundational cultural practices that contribute to some of the social ills that adversely impact the development of the Somali community in America.
* **Resettlement** - Following review of the traditional practices, leaders will review the cultural adjustment dynamics of Somali families and the broader community; with a specific focus on changes in gender roles and family and dynamics.
* **Adaptation** - After looking at resettlement issues, leaders will look at the general level of adaptation for our most vulnerable community members: women and children. Many of the community’s issues stem from the fact that even after a decade of life in America, many community members have not adapted sufficiently or developed the social and professional skills they need to succeed.
* **Progression** - Leaders will then move on to looking at the places or openings for progression. They will consider who has access to make meaningful progress, and why; and assess the obstacles that hamper consistent progress.
* **Balance** - Finally the leaders will look at the key elements needed for cultural and social balance within the community. It is the vision of the Somali community that progress will not come totally at the expense of culture but ~~that progress~~ will come in concert with the preservation of culture, thus they will work to create solutions that are integrated.

**5.**

**Balance**

**4.**

**Progression**

**3.**

**Adaptation**

**2.**

**Resettlement**

**1.**

**Tradition**

1. **Employment success**

The SDC has over fifteen years of experience in pre-employment training and work readiness, which includes work place etiquette, time management, and working in diverse environments. We are highly skilled with placement and retention of Low English Proficiency (LEP) workers because we understand the dynamics of placing first time workers; in particular refugee women, who have had little or no experience in formal work environments. We also understand the deep seated psycho-social factors that have impede successful job placement and retention among immigrant and refugee workers. To address the aforementioned issues, we provide vigorous follow-up with employers and post-job placement counseling for employees.

**Targeted population for employment success:** There are over 7,500 Somalis living in Metropolitan Boston who settled in Massachusetts during 1990’s as a result of civil war in their home countries. Starting this Fall, SDC plans to expand our employment service program - the Road to Economic Self Sufficiency (RESS) program - by enrolling forty-two men and women every year. Those enrolled will be refugees and immigrants, 80% women and 20% men who are ***chronically unemployed or underemployed documented immigrants who are English language learners and in need of ongoing post-resettlement services*** in order to fully integrate into American society and be part of the work force. Our clients are ESOL students and are not fully literate in either English or their heritage languages such as Somali, Amharic, and other East African languages. These clients hail from developing countries, and the majority of them are religious, racial, and linguistic minorities.

Many of our clients are single mothers who lost their husbands in their country’s civil wars and tribal conflicts. All, are very low income individuals and are getting public assistance from various government sources (i.e. transitional assistance, food stamps, Women Infant Children food supplement, subsidized housing, Mass Health, etc.). Consistent with traditional East African values, most of our women clients have a large number of children – an average of six per family. Unlike their male counterparts, many of these women are entering the workforce for the first time, because they functioned in traditional gender roles and did not work outside of the home in Somalia. Thus, their transition into American life is continuous and evolving, which makes career development needs ongoing. The majority are Muslims from Somalia, Kenya and Eritrea; and live in Boston neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Charlestown, South Boston, East Boston, Jamaica Plain and Roslindale.

**SAFE Objectives:**

1. To assess current and emerging issues that limit the community’s potential and progress.

2. To understand the different gender challenges in the Somali Community and how they impact the social adjustment process.

3. To assess the difficulties that immigrant women and girls face in traditional communities that offer limited opportunities for their growth.

4. To review the power dynamics in ethnic relationships and reflect on how power can lead to issues such as **violence against women and extremism.**

5. To review access to opportunities and how women and youth connect to them.

6. To review traditional practices and assess which aspects of these cause ***social harm.***

7. To figure out ways to respectfully modify cultural and religious practices that no longer serve the community well in the United States of America.

8. To formally recognize and the build on **existing** strengths that empower the Somali community.

9. To create sustainable programs that will aid in overcoming the challenges recognized by program leaders.

**SAFE Outcomes/ Timelines:**

* Leaders understand the root causes of key issues that adversely affect the Somali Community. November - January
* Leaders are engaged in strategic discussions about the health and well-being of the community (taking time to convene and plan). February - April
* Leaders take an active role in at least 4 meetings and 1 annual conference with other communities (interfaith, intercultural, and youth organizations) to get a diverse perspective on social matters and begin to use the information gathered to plan for ways to counter violent extremism (CVE) and the recruitment and radicalization efforts by ISIS, AL-Qaeda and their global affiliates. March - July
* Leaders have identified violence prevention strategies and support resources for both men and women, including mental health support and trainings as well as abuse hotlines and culturally-respectful advocacy resources (e.g. the YWCA’s domestic violence program and youth diversion programs).

April - June

* Leaders are engaged in the educational and professional development of women and young girls, including job and career training and planning, financial planning support and English Language Learning (ELL).

November - June

* Leaders are trained in psychological first aid for men and women to identify and provide mental health support around issues of self-esteem, anger management, conflict resolution, depression and anxiety etc. May - July
* Leaders take an active role in creating leadership roles for women in for leadership roles in the community to build women’s self-esteem and integrate female leadership as a community value. March - June

1. **SAFE Activity Schedule**

**1st QUARTER – November - January**

* **Topic:** Traditions & Women
* **Activity:** Group discussion on the origins of Somali traditions that adversely impact the role of women in the home and community.

Supplementary activity: create more opportunities for women to be leaders, both on a community level (in terms of having a voice), and on a socially integrative level (family, neighbors, and children.)

* **Outcome:**

Leaders recognize their role in maintaining and/or changing traditions that impact the welfare of the family, women and girls.

Women and girls develop skills to support self-esteem and a broader leadership role in the community.

**2nd QUARTER – February - April**

* **Topic:** Domestic Violence
* **Activity:** Discussion on male self-esteem and identity and factors that create conditions for abuse.
  + Supplementary activity: psychological first aid training for community leaders, to aid them in identifying the precursors to abuse, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and financial instability and provide mental health support to individuals.
  + Supplementary activity: create more opportunities for men to lead and be connected role models (particularly for younger men, who could feel alienated.)
* **Outcome:**

Leaders assess the key issues in their community that foster domestic abuse and review ways to address them more comprehensively.

**3rd QUARTER – May - July**

* **Topic:** Youth and CVE
* **Activity:** Discussion with immigrant youth providers to understand the factors that prompt young men to develop connections with extremist or terrorist organizations.
  + Supplementary activity: lead training on job, career, and education planning for young men to improve self-esteem and integration in the Boston community.
  + Supplementary activity: create junior community leadership opportunities for youth.
* **Outcome:** Leaders discuss and understand Somali young male socialization within the context of the American culture. Leaders look at “Push” and “Pull” factors that influence the behaviors of youth.

**4th QUARTER – August - October**

* **Topic:** Access to Democratic means for Negotiating Needs and Opinions.
* **Activity:** The groups will discuss the obstacles and opportunities to creating greater civic engagement and connection in the larger communities, disseminate information, and discuss and solve issues collaboratively.
  + Supplementary activity: train community leaders, including schools, faith-based organizations and nonprofit organizations and law enforcement agencies, on SAFE program and available resources to create word-of-mouth awareness.
* **Outcome:** Leaders understand the flow of information and can devise effective ways to communicate with broader community.

**ATTACHMENTS**