

WORLDS, from page 1

was," Adan explained through a translator. "When I got the eviction notice on my door, I didn't know what it was — I thought maybe I didn't pay a ticket."

As it turned out, the couple had already missed court dates, and they were on the verge of being thrown out of their four-bedroom home. They were able to stave off eviction only with the help and mediation of the Center for Intercultural Organizing, or CIO, which isn't usually involved in housing issues.

CIO Executive Director Kayse Jama, who also came as a refugee from Somalia and worked frantically with HAP to keep the family in their home, said the situation demonstrates a distinct communication failure.

The cluttered yard was "an issue, but not an issue that should have gone to that level," Jama said. "It has to be worked out — more culturally appropriate ways of communicating and explaining the rights and responsibilities of the families."

Now Adan and Ismail are having trouble determining how much money they owe New Columbia, since their bills were put on hold during the eviction process they weren't aware of. At one point, as he showed Jama a flurry of English-language documents that he didn't understand, Adan raised his palms in resignation.

"We came from a war-torn country, and we tried to work hard and get jobs and help ourselves and our family and our children," Ismail said, also through translation. When they discovered that they faced eviction, she said, she briefly thought, "Why not send me back to Africa? I don't have anywhere to live. Please send me back to the war-torn country that I came from."

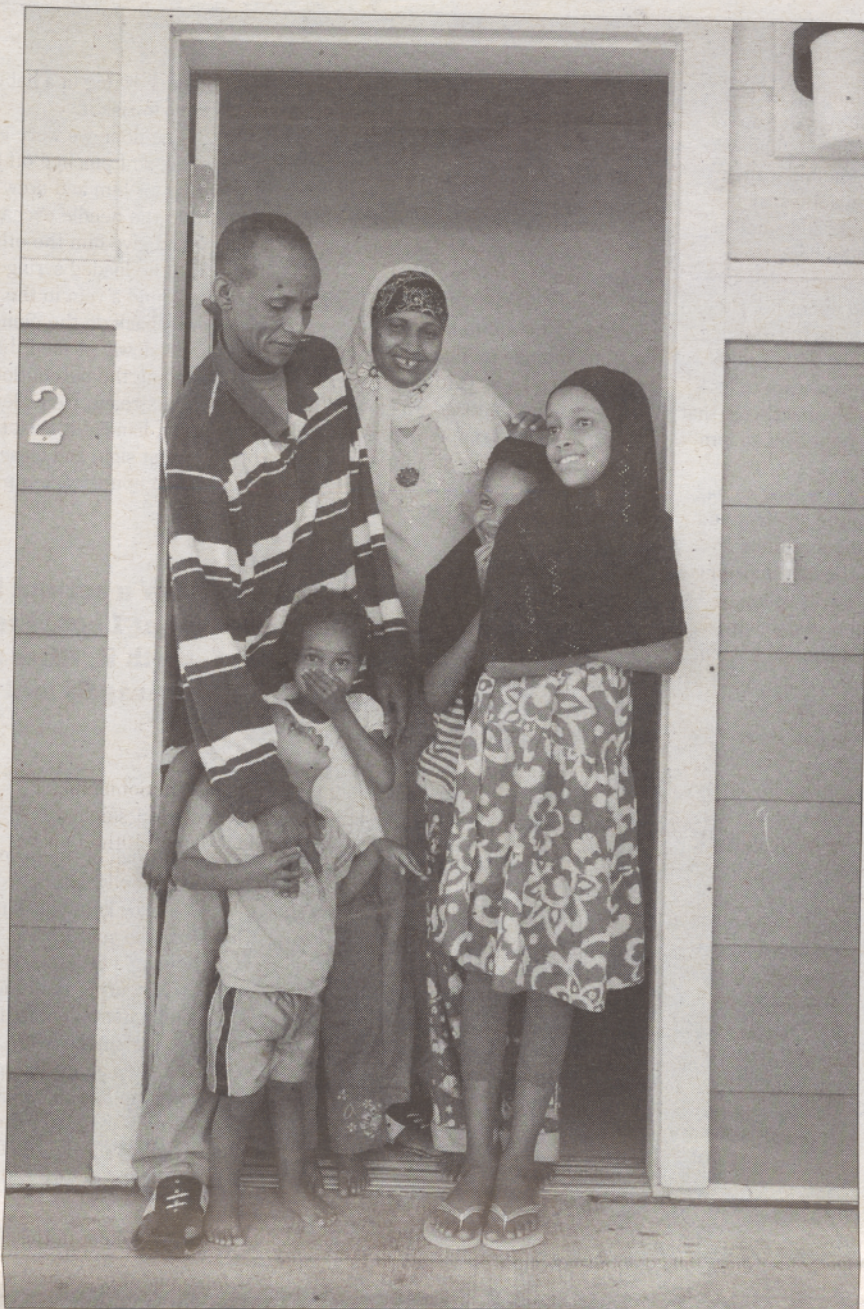
According to Portland's Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, Oregon is home to about 20,000 African immigrants and their families. Many came as agency-sponsored refugees from conflict-ridden nations like Somalia, Eritrea, Burundi and Liberia, and their numbers keep growing. In 1990, one in 30 black Oregonians was born outside the U.S.; now it's one in 10, according to the recently released State of Black Oregon report.

Yet the African population's increasing prominence is not necessarily reflected in Portland's services or its public consciousness, says Evelyn Ello-Hart of the African Women's Coalition.

Ello-Hart, an impassioned advocate originally from the Ivory Coast, says the African immigrant and refugee community is too often lumped in with the African American community, when in reality the two groups' needs can be very different. She says the city does little specific outreach to the African community, so that even when there is assistance available to struggling African families, no one knows it's there.

"We are so many times left out because people assume we are African American," Ello-Hart said. "I feel like someone just dumped us in the Pacific Ocean when we got to Portland."

It's hard to get a handle on how many Africans are struggling with housing issues, but everybody has an anecdote. Ello-Hart tells of a family of eight crammed into a 3-bedroom apartment with air quality so bad "I couldn't breathe." Dana Wedel, who teaches English to African women and youth, knows a Sudanese woman who left an



Clockwise: Saleman Adan, Suleqa Ismail, Fartun (9), Fatheyra (6), Faiza (3), Fuad (17 months) at their apartment in Portland.

apartment in another state without notice — she didn't understand that it would mar her rental history — and now has trouble finding somewhere new to live. Jama is aware of at least two other New Columbia families in danger of eviction because they couldn't read bills or warning letters.

"It's the same pattern," Jama said. "I don't know how many else are facing this problem."

Advocates stress that the primary obstacle for the African community is the same as for other low-income Portlanders: The town has a serious shortage of affordable, quality rental housing. The waiting lists for HAP's public housing and subsidized rent programs are both closed, with over 3,000 people on each.

But there are cultural factors for African immigrants and refugees that can make the situation even more precarious, and the language barrier is just the beginning. African families are frequently larger than the average American family, for example, and occupancy standards can dictate that they must rent larger apartments — which can be even more of a stretch to afford.

"A lot of families I've seen, that's one of the barriers — they have so many kids," said Susi Steinmann, who coordinates the

African Women's Coalition's literacy program.

With nowhere else to go, households with family or homeland connections often end up moving in together.

"There's a very strong sense of community in the African community," Steinmann said. "People are not going to be on the street before they're absorbed into another household."

Ello-Hart agrees, and she stresses that over-packed households represent a real but difficult-to-trace manifestation of homelessness in the African community.

"You won't see Africans under the bridge," Ello-Hart said. "But you will see households over capacity."

But while home-sharing may make sense to a family that has lived through a crowded refugee camp, it often violates leases. HAP clients, for instance, can lose their public assistance entirely if they are found to have extra people in the household.

Meera Batra, who manages a parenting program within the New Columbia, says she's seen it happen.

"Somebody knows somebody from their village who lives in a different town, and they invite them over to come look for a job and stay with them ... and it's not looked

upon very kindly," she said. "That's a cultural issue."

At the Plaza Townhomes, a HAP subsidized housing property in North Portland, manager Chris Connell estimates that about 80 percent of his tenants are of African origin. Connell pulls out a three-ringed binder overstuffed with applications for the complex. Many of the names seem to be of African origin.

The waiting list for the townhomes is closed, with 145 people hoping for one of the 34 two-bedroom units. That's about a two-year wait if the apartments have a regular turnover rate, Connell says — but with the economy in the tank, no tenants have moved out for six months.

"I think we were doing a disservice to people by taking applications and giving them hope," Connell said.

Concentrated African communities have emerged over time in several parts of Portland, including the Plaza Townhomes and a particular cul-de-sac at the New Columbia. That can be a great thing, Steinmann of the African Women's Coalition explained, because families who understand each other will trade things like childcare or grocery shopping and have an easier time settling in.

"It creates a social space that really helps women be able to get out and be in the community," Steinmann said.

The benefits are so stark, in fact, that when the New Columbia held a focus group for African families in the complex, many asked if management could intentionally house African immigrants and refugees next to one another.

"Many of the families said, 'Could all the African families be placed in one section of New Columbia?'" explained John Keating, HAP's assistant director for community building. "I can see why folks would want that, but of course, from a fair-housing North American culture, you could never do that. That would be seen as segregation and prejudice." Instead, Keating said, HAP tries to sponsor events for the mini-communities that emerge.

HAP is also trying to determine the best way to communicate with residents so problems like Adan and Ismail's are less frequent, though no definite solution has yet emerged.

"How can you meet them halfway?" Batra said. "It's going to be hard to bridge that gap ... Managers and everyone need to be open to more trainings and talks, and getting the community in to talk to them about what works for them."

There's still a long way to go, advocates say. According to Jama, the African immigrant and refugee population is still considered one of the most underserved in Portland. The Center for Intercultural Organizing work to help immigrant communities advocate for themselves, but Jama says there's also an onus on the city to take care of those it takes in. "We have an obligation to make sure that they're supported," he said.

Ismail and Adan say they will do everything they can to follow the rules and keep their home. Adan is training to work as a truck driver — he was about to take his licensing test when the eviction came up — and though their experience of late has been frustrating, they keep it in perspective.

"There's no war here," Ismail said. "The issues that we dealt with here are nothing compared to (Somalia), so we're absolutely grateful that we're safe and we're here."

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