

**ABDI, from page 9**

Refugee Community Organization. He was able to utilize his fluency in Swahili, which he learned while living in Kenya, as well as his region's Somali dialect.

Abdi saw that opportunity as a vital learning experience and springboard for what he wants to do to further support the burgeoning Somali community in Ontario with his very own nonprofit one day.

He said the Welcome Center had a process he found problematic when trying to find employment for families seeking services.

One particular family he met was struggling because the grandmother became the foster mother of her grandchildren after their mother had to remain in Somalia. Now she's raising several young children in the United States and doesn't know how to drive or receive adequate welfare.

While the Welcome Center is there to help, its primary focus and grant funding is for translation services. The self-sufficiency grant funds are also restricted to benefiting refugees within five years of arrival, despite that, on average, refugees are economically on par with their wider communities and are self-sufficient after about seven years, according to a 2017 data analysis by The Washington Post.

Abdi sees a great need for continued services well beyond those five or seven



*Abdikadir Abdi's partner, Munira, and the couple's daughter.*

PHOTOS BY CELESTE NOCHE

years.

"I want to stay here 10 or 15 years," he said. "We like it here in Ontario, but the only problem is they don't have a lot of resources. They don't know what to do or where to go. We have to explain the benefits

to them, and they need to understand what kind of help they need."

He hopes to move to Ontario from Boise soon but is juggling the responsibilities of fatherhood, owning and managing the Broadway Taxi cab company in Boise, and

completing a criminal justice program at the Treasure Valley Community College campus in Ontario. He looks forward to the future and all that he'll do to make sure it's filled with much joy, recreation and kinship in the Somali community.

**ONTARIO, from page 9**

tattoos or that I have Jesus on my hand. So, (I feel) free."

In San Diego, Jarjees spent years working full time at a hospital in a similar role to positions he previously held in Iraq and later Ontario, assisting doctors and nurses with procedural preparation by supplying them with the correct sterile instruments. But his commutes were 90 minutes each way with traffic, and he had to pick up gigs as an Amazon Flex package courier three times per week to make ends meet. That made it even more difficult to spend time at home with his wife, Afrah Jarjees, and their three children, ages 7, 6 and 5. On top of that, he was helping his parents supplement their livelihood.



**Melad Jarjees**

So, at the end of 2016, he decided to provisionally move to Ontario after he met a farmer from Boise, Idaho, who assured him it would be easier for him and his family to get by in Treasure Valley. More importantly, he also learned about the short Section 8 wait time, which he hadn't been able to utilize in San Diego, although he qualified, due to wait times that exceeded 10 years.

Finding adequate housing, however, was a crucial component in determining whether Ontario could be a place to call home. And while the hunt for housing is a process ordinarily stressful for any person, even when searching in the same city, that wasn't really the case for Jarjees.

"When I came to Ontario, I felt more calm because the cost of living is cheap and the people there are super nice, too. They help," Jarjees said. "When you ask questions, they'll leave everything to answer

you, and if they don't know, they'll come with you wherever you need. When I (arrived), it was hard to find a house. So, I asked this older guy, around 80 years old, and he left everything inside his house and came with me, in my car, for like two hours. And then not just this guy. A lot of people did that. After I found a house, he called his friends and neighbors. In San Diego, it's busy."

Renee Cummings, director of the Four Rivers Welcome Center, said community-fueled interactions like Jarjees' experienced are exactly what she and the volunteers who founded the center earlier this year hope happen for refugees in Ontario more regularly.

"There have been a lot of people talking about loneliness and isolation," she said. "We're finding the most successful refugee families here have had somebody be there for them."

The Four Rivers Welcome Center, which officially opened as a single-employee organization in May, with Cummings leading the way, provides translation services, assistance with job applications and interviews, and a vital opportunity for recreation and community with other refugee families. The endeavor was initially funded through a grant application by the Four Rivers Health Care, a free health care clinic primarily serving people without health insurance that offered its lobby to the center. Cummings' grant covers operations through March 2019.

It still looks a bit like a lobby, but Cummings immediately hung up a world map and stocked up on candies and teas from the countries of many refugees' origin. A desktop computer is open to the public, and three desks nearby are occupied by

Cummings and Arabic speakers Ekram Ahmed and Jaafar Raheem.

In July, the Welcome Center partnered with Portland-based Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) to further connect with the local refugees and hire part-time and full-time translators directly from the community, until funding lapsed at the end of September. Jarjees was one of four volunteer-turned-employees, and he worked there for about one month.

Most of the roughly 50 refugee families in the area have come to Ontario from the towns and cities where they were placed after resettling from Iraq, Somalia and Sudan, but low-income families across the United States continue to move to rural communities, such as Ontario, to receive the rental assistance benefits they qualify for sooner. The waitlist finally reopened earlier this month; it had been closed and new applicants were not being processed for almost half a year.

Kristy Rodriguez, Housing Choice Voucher Occupancy specialist at the Housing Authority of Malheur and Harney Counties, said there are approximately 347 households on the waitlist with an expected wait time of about 18 months. While the housing authority no longer has a shortfall, she expects the counties to cycle in and out of shortfall over the next few years as a result of voucher transfers to areas with higher housing costs.

With guidance from HUD, the local housing authority has adopted a preference process for Section 8 vouchers to now prioritize Malheur County residents in addition to the existing vulnerable designations, including victims of domestic violence, people with disabilities, and people who are homeless, elderly or veterans.

While Jarjees said he enjoyed the slower pace of life and strong sense of community

offered by Ontario, the decision to move was motivated by factors beyond his own preferences.

"I liked living there, but my family is important, and (I need to) support them," he said. "Nobody was there to help them."

While the goal of refugee resettlement programs globally is ultimately to have people move back to their home countries, less than 1 percent of the world's refugees ever do. The Ontario pit stop will likely last much longer for refugee families interested in leaving, but who are new to the waitlist or were recently added.

Cummings, who for three years was a housing advocate at local nonprofit Community In Action, expects even more changes.

"It won't surprise me actually if some of the ones who port their vouchers out end up coming back because I think there's some confusion on what the resettlement agencies offer (after) that first year," Cummings said. "Without some of that extra assistance, I think it's going to be hard for some people to stay in those areas that have such a high cost of living. They may not end up coming back to Ontario, but I have a feeling they will stay in (neighboring) places like it."

In the meantime, she said, the Welcome Center is here to stay and will offer services to all Ontario residents with open arms.

"What I've been saying to families is I can't do anything about (Section 8), but if you know you're going to be here for two more years, what can we do to make those two years better for you? What kinds of things can this community work on?" she said. "The hope is that in two years, things have gotten better, they've gotten used to it, and, you know, the longer you stay some place, the more it feels like home."