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Head of Willmar, Minn.'s, African Development Center settles in

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By: [Linda Vanderwerf](#), West Central Tribune

WILLMAR — After living in the Twin Cities, Willmar has been a pleasant surprise for Yusuf Ahmed, the new head of the African Development Center office in Willmar.

"It's a small town and everybody knows everybody," he said. "I love it."

An advantage of a smaller town is that he can drive downtown for work and walk to most of the meetings he has. He's also impressed that many high-ranking business and government officials live right in the town, he said.

The African community and the community as a whole have been welcoming to him, he said last week, and he appreciates it.

Ahmed started working for the African Development Center and moved to Willmar in March. He had previously worked for the city of Minneapolis and served on the African Development Center board and its loan committee in Minneapolis. The African Development Center is one of the leading small business lenders in the Twin Cities area and has branch offices in Willmar and Rochester.

When the original Willmar office manager Abdirizak Mahboub resigned earlier this year, the African Development Center needed someone who could come here right away. Ahmed applied for and got the job.

Ahmed said his goals for the local immigrant community are to increase financial literacy and help Somalis move into the mainstream of American life.

"It's essential for them to understand how financial institutions work, or they will not go to the mainstream," he said.

"We still have a long way to go," he said, but it should help to have an office where someone speaks their language.

"I can tell them in plain Somali language," he added. "We are here to help."

The African Development Center offers information and classes about opening bank accounts, budgeting, building credit and buying homes. The next homebuyer class is scheduled for June 16. All the center's services are open to everyone, not just the African immigrant community, he said.

The African Development Center can help develop financial tools for Muslims who do not pay interest. "We need to work with them," Ahmed said. "If they don't want interest, there are other ways to get a loan; it's called a profit loan. ... It's not difficult for us to adjust to that type of loan."

Somalis are hard-working people and want what most people do, to live in a good neighborhood and send their children to good schools, he said. The community's interest in developing a mosque is a sign of a community that plans to put down roots and be part of the community.

Another goal of the center is to work with young people in the African community, he said.

"We want to reach out to youth, to teach them to become the entrepreneurs of tomorrow," he said. "That's also our ADC agenda."

Ahmed came to the United States in 1990, just before civil war broke out in Somalia. He had been working for the government and could see that the society was becoming unstable. Within a few months, the war started.

He received asylum and started a new life here. He lived in Virginia for years with other members of his family and at one time worked for the State Department on refugee issues.

One of his sisters moved with her children to Minnesota, where she had friends. When she died in March 2007, he moved to Eden Prairie to live with her teenaged children until they left for college. Ahmed stayed, working for the city of Minneapolis as a liaison with the Somali community and then in development offices.

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