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## **Briefing on Civil Rights Issues Facing Muslims and Arab Americans in North Dakota Post-September 11**

**Before the North Dakota Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights**

**May 23, 2002**

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### **Executive Summary**

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Following the tragedies of September 11, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights asked its State Advisory Committees to review and report on discrimination against persons of actual or perceived Arab or South Asian ancestry or of the Muslim or Sikh religions. On May 23, 2002, the Commission's North Dakota Advisory Committee held a forum in Fargo to conduct such a review. Presentations were made to Advisory Committee members by a broad cross section of persons representing state and local governments, and advocacy groups. Set forth below are summaries of those presentations. The full transcript of the proceedings follows this summary.

#### **Intolerance**

Bruce Furness, mayor of Fargo, noted the community's rapidly changing demographics. The minority population doubled in the 1980s, and again in the 1990s. Fargo has taken steps to address this new diversity, creating the Cultural Diversity Project, the Center for New Americans, which provides services to new immigrants, and the Work Force Development and Diversity Task Force, under the Chamber of Commerce. The city also set up a Human Relations Commission aimed at improving relationships among people of different backgrounds.

Chris Magnus, Fargo's police chief, noted that there were few reported hate crimes resulting from the September 11 attacks, which he attributed to the aggressive response of the police department. The police department headed a press conference immediately after the attacks to assure people of color that their rights would be protected. Patrols also increased surveillance near sites perceived as vulnerable to acts of reprisal, such as places of worship. The department continued a community-orientated policing approach, within which officers and neighbors were able to communicate effectively about community strengths and problems. The local media also helped to educate the general public about the concerns, fears, and apprehensions of minority residents.

While police and city efforts have been effective in curbing hate crimes, there have still been incidents of discrimination and harassment. Media reported on four Muslim women wearing headscarves who were harassed. At a local Islamic center, a man pulled a gun out of the trunk of his car. In both instances police were notified and responded immediately. Panelists did note, however, that the community was overwhelmingly supportive, sending cards and flowers to people who had been subjected to post-September 11 backlash.

Sajid Ghauri, a member of the Islamic Society of Fargo-Moorhead, said there are more than 3,000 Muslims in the community from such diverse countries as Bosnia, Somalia, Indonesia, Pakistan, India,

Bangladesh, and Sudan. In the days immediately following September 11, Muslims were very afraid? half stopped going to mosque, and Muslim females who covered their heads refrained from leaving their homes to shop. Mr. Ghauri recognized the tireless efforts of the city to make the neighborhood a safe and welcoming place for Muslims.

Kathy Thoreson, director of the Center for New Americans at Lutheran Social Services, said the number of refugees coming into North Dakota and the country in general has decreased dramatically since September 11. Only 21 refugees had entered the state since October 1. Anti-immigrant sentiment was evident in phone calls the center received after September 11 and in letters to the editor in the local newspaper condemning the organization's helping of refugees; some people said that help should be funneled into "one's own community," and refugees clearly did not fit into that sense of community.

Ms. Thoreson also noted instances of discrimination in the area, including the case of an Afghan woman who was fired the day after September 11. At a local school, a young Muslim Somali girl who wore a headscarf and veil was teased constantly after the terrorist attacks. Bosnian refugees, she said, have expressed gratefulness that they are of the same skin color as other Americans in the area so that they will not be automatically perceived as refugees.

Yusuf Sharif-Ibrahim, a Somali American community member, commented on treatment he and other Muslims have faced since the terrorist attacks. He described resistance to the establishment of an Islamic cemetery, and the case of a Muslim woman who was denied U.S. citizenship because, after working long hours and taking care of five children, she did not have time to learn English.

Dr. William Nganje, assistant professor at North Dakota State University, recounted an instance where he was called a racial slur in a bookstore. He also said his son was called a racial slur and threatened by a classmate. Special attention needs to be given to educating parents to create an air of tolerance in their homes and not to pass on hate speech and ideology to their children.

Mohamed Matar, president of the Muslim Student Association at North Dakota State University, said he was surprised how little discrimination there was on campus after 9/11. He did, however, notice that membership attendance at meetings decreased tenfold after the attacks. Many students were afraid to be associated with the organization because of a perception that the FBI was targeting foreign-born students.

Although Police Chief Magnus emphasized the department's clear prohibition on racial profiling, some speakers contended that racial profiling has occurred in the area, notably of young people in shopping malls and even on the street. The police department and others have attempted to confront these perceptions by opening lines of communication between officers and university and secondary school students. For example, North Dakota State University hosted presentations by police officers at the beginning of the school year, Cultural Diversity Resources conducted diversity training for businesses, and the Fargo Human Relations Commission has reached out to K-12 students through public meetings.

Several organizations have worked to combat post-9/11 discrimination and foster better race relations. The Human Relations Commission has carried out activities to promote racial diversity and support people of color. For example, the commission organized a Martin Luther King Jr. celebration, in which 700 people participated. Cheryl Bergian, chair of the commission and director of the North Dakota Human Rights Coalition, commented on the importance of the city's provision of a staff person to the Human Relations Commission, which otherwise consists of nine volunteers.

Diane Wray Williams of the Justice Circle is involved with community organizing, education, and

advocacy in order to enhance equal opportunity and racial and ethnic justice. The Justice Circle has worked in nearby Moorhead, Minnesota, to address racial segregation. Ms. Williams, along with other members of the civil rights community, identified important issues to work on, including income and employment, education, public safety, and housing. Slowly the community is changing to be a more accepting place, and many people are taking advantage of anti-racism and white privilege training.

## **Employment**

The key to combating racism in employment and other arenas is education. Mayor Furness cited the importance of understanding Islam and its foundations and noted that many cross-religious information sessions had taken place in the Fargo area. Still, the mayor pointed out the lack of minorities in city staff and police officer positions and noted efforts to recruit more people of color to fill these posts. Cultural Diversity Resources? leadership program has helped to place people of color into elected and appointed city positions. For the police force recruiting program, instead of seeking out people of color from metropolitan areas, the department visits local high schools and tries to get minority students excited about a career in police work.

Mr. Sharif-Ibrahim brought attention to the fact that many highly educated refugees are performing low-skilled jobs. Doctors, teachers, and lawyers are put in minimum wage jobs. Social service agencies have tried to assist refugees to work toward certification, obtain language skills, and go through job training. Agencies and the government provide cash assistance to refugees for eight months, which leaves little time for immigrants to become financially stable. There are nighttime English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, but when families must take care of several children it is difficult for parents to attend classes. Despite the lack of spare time, federal regulations require that all refugees take an ESL class or their money can be taken away.

Jeannie Camarillo, a staff member at Motivation, Education, and Training, helps clients to move from agriculture or seasonal farm work into permanent positions so they can eventually become self-sufficient. The organization provides training for up to two years, and GED and ESL classes. Still, Ms. Camarillo has witnessed much of the discrimination in the workplace that the immigrants she has placed have faced. Employers will agree to hire clients but upon meeting them, they will suddenly say that the position has been filled. They will also be suspicious of the immigrants? work ethic and worry that they will leave the position after a few years. This argument, however, is unfounded because the average American?immigrant or not?holds a job for three to four years before starting a new one.

## **Housing**

Housing is a major concern for immigrants and refugees. Many cannot pass the credit check landlords use because they have recently arrived in the country and have not had time to establish a credit history, or they lack sufficient resources to obtain credit.

Lutheran Social Services has decided to no longer act as a co-signer on leases for refugees. As a result, it must find apartments for these people who are blocked out of major rental properties. It is often difficult to find apartment owners who will rent to refugees without a co-signer or who will allow relatives of a refugee to co-sign. In the past, Lutheran Social Services requested an inspection by the Fair Housing Council, which found discrimination against refugees in housing.

Amy Schauer Nelson, executive director of the North Dakota Fair Housing Council, commented that on top of being discriminated against in obtaining housing, once they do get an apartment and later move out, refugees and immigrants are charged excessively for damages compared with other tenants. An

investigation also found that refugees are treated very differently from white college students who have lived with their parents all their lives and similarly do not have credit history. Often the white college student can have his or her parents co-sign for six months, whereas the refugee is required to have someone co-sign for up to five years.

### **Social Services**

Kathy Hogan, director of Cass County Social Services, discussed the social service needs of immigrants and refugees. Six to eight years ago few services existed for refugees. Many were not attending school or receiving health care. Ms. Hogan said her organization has attempted to deal in the best way possible with cultural differences between American-born residents and refugees. Unfortunately, the organization has had difficulty recruiting minority employees. The 7 percent of staff who are minorities are Native American or Hispanic. Refugees often do not have the minimum educational requirements as licensed social workers. To compensate, the organization has provided diversity training to staff and educational training for low-income individuals and refugees, and set up an interpreter system.

Dr. Kevin Thompson, professor of sociology at North Dakota State University, conducted a study on the impact of refugees on the city of Fargo. The goals of the study were to assess the impact of refugee resettlement on service delivery agencies, to identify concerns among these service deliverers, and to provide the Refugee Impact Committee with recommendations in order to provide better services and support for refugees settling in Fargo. Since 1996, the number of refugees coming into Fargo has increased exponentially, causing a strain on social service and health care providers. Furthermore, Fargo was attracting the most refugees, with Bismarck and Grand Forks receiving very few. Noting a lack of communication between social service providers, the final report recommended that a coordinator of refugee services be hired. Another finding was that refugees were very unfamiliar with the bureaucratic workings of benefits, enrolling children into schools, employment, and Social Security.