

## Hope & Fear in Minnesota's Heartland



People talk on the stairs of the Stearns County Courthouse following a 2015 rally in protest of an immigration speaker. DAVE SCHWARZ/FILE/ST. CLOUD TIMES

## Hope & Fear

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estimated to have come to Central Minnesota, many as “secondary refugees” like Farhiya: Those who were initially placed in another city and later moved to St. Cloud.

But the exact number is unknown. Minnesota has one of the highest, if not the highest, rate of secondary migration, but the state does not systematically track secondary refugees moving to Minnesota. Like other U.S. residents, they are free to move about the country.

The most recent American Community Survey shows 3,542 residents report Somali ancestry in the 194,000 St. Cloud metro area, which includes Stearns and Benton counties. But experts say that’s not a perfect measure because some people may identify more with an ethnic group than a country, while others don’t know how to answer.

Other data is also less than precise. For example, there are nearly 11,000 foreign-born residents in the St. Cloud metro area, but that includes people born in all other countries, like Canada or Mexico, and doesn’t account for those of Somali-descent born in the U.S. Likewise, Census figures on households that speak Somali leave out young children and include some speakers of other African languages.

Mónica García-Pérez, an economics professor and director of the St. Cloud State University Faculty Research Group of Immigrants in Minnesota, said estimates of the Somali community range from 4,000 to 13,000 residents. She thinks it’s around 4,000 to 6,000, but says the 2020 Census should provide more clarity.

Many of those opposed to refugee resettlement say they believe around 20,000 or 25,000 Somali people live in the area. But local researchers and experts say that estimate is likely far too high.

“I don’t think that 25,000 is remotely close to what is possible,” said Minnesota State Demographer Susan Brower, even as there’s some “wiggle room” in the Census estimates.

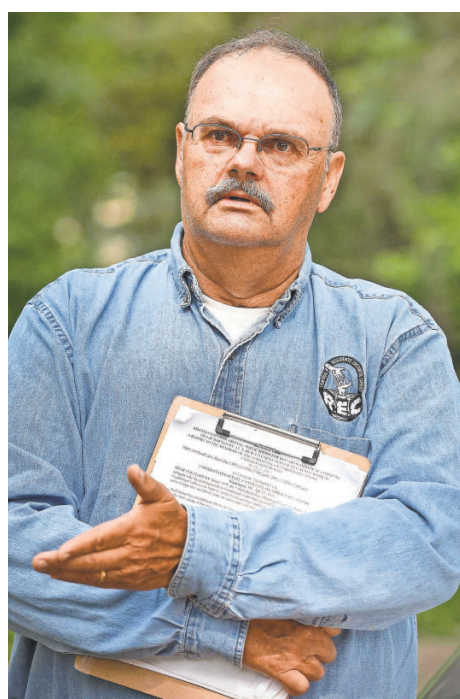
Central Minnesota as a whole remains by-and-large homogeneous. White residents, after all, still make up around 90 percent of the St. Cloud metro area, according to the American Community Survey.

“While, yes, there have been changes and the population is becoming more diverse in Central Minnesota, it still lags far behind the U.S. and even Minnesota overall,” Brower said.

### The pushback to Somali refugees

As St. Cloud has grown, not all have welcomed the changes.

The city’s demographic shifts have fueled anxiety and fear among some white residents. Some trace it back to the Crossroads Center stabbings in which Dahir Adan stabbed 10 people at



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**John Palmer**, at left, a former St. Cloud State professor and leader of C-Cubed, which wants to stop refugee resettlement in St. Cloud. PHOTO BY JASON WACHTER/ST. CLOUD TIMES

the St. Cloud mall, but pushback preceded the 2016 attack.

Though St. Cloud has accepted refugees from around the world – including Vietnamese, Iraqi, Sudanese and Karen refugees – there has long been backlash toward Somali residents, many of whom are Muslim.

Mosques and Somali-owned businesses have been frequent targets of vandalism. A few years ago, Somali residents reported they found pig intestines wrapped around the door handles of a halal grocery store. In June, an unknown man walked into a mosque with a dog, pulling off dog hair and throwing it on the ground – a gesture believed to play upon stereotypes that Muslims don’t like dogs.

A slate of anti-Muslim speakers has made routine stops in a few St. Cloud-area churches, restaurants and VFWs on their tours across the state. The speakers, often invited by locals activists, have spread a message that intertwines

explicitly anti-Muslim rhetoric with broader concerns about immigration and the costs of refugee resettlement.

Some St. Cloud residents have taken an outspoken role opposing refugees. A few years ago, a group of conservative anti-refugee activists in St. Cloud coalesced into a small-yet-vocal organization called Concerned Community Citizens, or C-Cubed.

The nativist group was formed by John Palmer in the wake of the failed 2017 refugee moratorium. The former St. Cloud State professor was one of two C-Cubed candidates who unsuccessfully ran for City Council last year, pledging to stop the refugee resettlement program, even though resettlement is governed under federal, not local law.

In recent years, Palmer has given a series of talks criticizing the cost of refugee resettlement to representatives of state and local governments. Donning red “Make St. Cloud Great Again” hats, Palmer led a group of residents around

the area seeking to put a resolution on last year’s city ballot calling on federal officials to stop the resettlement program – an effort that came up short with about half the signatures it needed by the city’s deadline, according to Palmer.

St. Cloud City Council member Jeff Goerger doesn’t buy that C-Cubed’s concerns are really about the costs. “I think I know what they want: They want people leaving the community,” he said, maintaining the refugee population hasn’t added to the city’s budget.

Though C-Cubed says they’re merely raising questions about the resettlement program, the group’s leaders openly express overt anti-Muslim rhetoric: warning that Muslims are imposing Sharia law, Islam promotes violence and Muslims cannot live under the U.S. Constitution.

“There’s no such thing as Islamophobia,” Palmer said in an interview with the St. Cloud Times. “Phobia is an irrational fear. There’s nothing irrational about being concerned and protecting yourself when you look at the 1,400-year history of Islam.”

“What we are questioning as far as Islam goes is the doctrine,” said C-Cubed member Liz Baklaich, on local radio show following the New York Times article.

“It’s the ideology,” she added. “I don’t hate any individual person. Hearts and minds can change. The ideology, though, I don’t know how you can change that.”

Baklaich, who ran alongside Palmer in the 2018 council elections, declined to be interviewed by the St. Cloud Times for this series.

Some C-Cubed critics, which include some fellow conservatives, dismiss the group as “a few people sitting in a Culver’s.” The group has a dozen people regularly attend its meetings, but Palmer said its email list contains more than 250 people.

But others see C-Cubed’s presence, as well as the litany of high-profile harassment incidents in the city, as evidence of St. Cloud’s ongoing problem with hate.

Jaylani Hussein, executive director of the Minnesota Council on American-Islamic Relations, says St. Cloud has long been the breeding ground for the state’s anti-Muslim movement.

“St. Cloud is still the epicenter of hate groups in Minnesota, especially the anti-Muslim movement,” Hussein said. “This is clear organizing that is happening. You don’t have that in Willmar.”

In September, a panel discussion in St. Cloud about dismantling hate crimes – which included Hussein, the ACLU of Minnesota, St. Cloud police, the Minnesota Department of Human Rights and the FBI – was postponed over safety concerns after a conservative group protested CAIR’s involvement.

Other regional centers have experienced growing immigration trends in recent years. As a sizable Somali community developed in Willmar, some white



Farhiya Iman speaks with friends July 22 at Nori Cafe in St. Cloud. DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

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