Help in a land of confusion: Nonprofit assists refugees, becomes model for other groups
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The daily mail brings Subei Guhad a world of worry and confusion.

She knows some of the letters mean financial aid or that bills are due. She just doesn't know what any of the words mean.

So for six years, Guhad, a Somali refugee who doesn't speak English, takes her mail and any other troubles to the Horn of Africa. She drops by the office at 5348 University Ave. in City Heights almost every day.

"I've been reliant on them and still am reliant on them," Guhad said through a translator.

For a little more than a decade, the nonprofit organization has helped African refugees struggling with life in San Diego. The community has come to rely on Horn of Africa for everything from health care to trips to doctors.

The organization has become a model to other refugee resettlement groups for its innovative programs, services and ability to obtain grant funding. In 2004, Horn of Africa helped more than 900 refugee families from eastern Africa.

"Lots of agencies come and go," said Bob Montgomery, regional resettlement director for the International Rescue Committee. "They have demonstrated they have staying power."

Montgomery's organization, which contracts with the State Department to provide refugee assistance, said it is difficult for any group to sustain funding. Horn of Africa, he said, did a lot early on without funding and built a successful reputation. Today, it relies on grants, has an annual budget of about $700,000 and has a paid staff of 18 and some 30 volunteers.

This year, Horn of Africa plans to launch a health care program for families with newborns. The Families Together program will track the health of 20 children for the first three years of their lives.

With about $600,000 in private grants, Horn of Africa plans to hire two bilingual case workers to visit families twice a week, under the supervision of a nurse.

"It's a model of Healthy Families but specifically for the East African community," said Hamse Warfa, community outreach specialist for Horn of Africa.
Warfa said the program, scheduled to begin in April, will provide more than just health care education to parents. The case workers also will assess any issues the families are having.

"So you are becoming their problem solver," Warfa said. "You go and hear all of their problems."

**Filling a need**

There are an estimated 20,000 East Africans -- mostly refugees -- in San Diego, Montgomery said, adding that it is difficult to do an accurate count. Horn of Africa estimates there about 12,000 Somalis in San Diego.

Somali refugees arrived in the United States to flee a brutal civil war, Warfa said. San Diego has the second-largest Somali population in the country after Minnesota, he said. Many stay because of the large population already here and the weather, Warfa said.

In 1994, with an increasing Somali population, San Diego community leaders saw a need to organize. A year later, Horn of Africa obtained nonprofit status and opened an office on University Avenue, near its current location.

"We realized the community was facing significant barriers," Warfa said.

The organization moved to its current location about five years ago, a little closer to an area referred to as "Little Mogadishu" because of the large number of Somalis who make their home there.

"The community is very reliant on us," Warfa said.

California Endowment, a private statewide health foundation, has been a key source of funding. The group has awarded the agency more than $500,000 in grants, including $291,000 to fund almost half of the Families Together program.

"They have done really well with every grant we've made," said Gregory Hall, senior program officer for the foundation.

Funding from California Endowment and other foundations has allowed Horn of Africa to expand. In September, when the East African Youth Organization's grant funding ran out, Horn of Africa picked up the program.

The organization has always provided support for the youth program, taking the children on field trips to Hollywood and Magic Mountain, but will now assume the financial backing. The youth group was started in 2002 by the police department with a $300,000 federal grant.
"Without (Horn of Africa), the program wouldn't be the same," said Deeq Abdi, 17, a member of the youth group.

Horn of Africa is using a $1 million grant to open a youth center with the Police Athletic League in Colina Del Sol Park in City Heights. The youth group, which has 300 members, has outgrown its meeting area at the Multi-Cultural Storefront on University Avenue.

The center is scheduled to open in July.

**Day-to-day help**

It's the daily operations at Horn of Africa that the community seems to appreciate the most. The staff and volunteers do a little of everything, from translating documents to driving people to the store.

Adar Ali, a mother of seven, stops by the office about four times a week. Ali might bring what many in the community call the "no, no" forms to be filled out. The forms for government assistance ask if anything has changed in the family's status, and the answer is always no.

When she started receiving the forms, she would toss them away, costing her a few months of checks. Now, someone at Horn of Africa assists her in completing them.

"This is the only place I get help," Ali said through a translator.

Warfa said the challenge is keeping enough employees in the office. Sometimes, a client needs transportation, which can be an all-day endeavor.

The office also holds monthly workshops on financial literacy or quarterly ones about nutrition.

A recent workshop about the need for better food choices drew more than 20 people, mostly Somalis. The organization provided food and gave each participant a $5 phone card for calling Africa.

One man asked the speaker, Shukri Adam, a county health educator, what cancer was because he kept hearing it mentioned. Another asked what vegetable would stop him from smoking.

Adam patiently answered all of their questions and handed them toothbrushes and pencils before they left.

The workshops have been popular in the community, Warfa said. A refugee group, the Somali Bantu of San Diego, often asks Warfa to conduct workshops for its members.
"I have to do many things for them," said Hamadi Madisa, a leader in the Bantu group, which numbers about 380 in San Diego.

Horn of Africa has assisted the Bantu group since its inception in 2004. The aid group since has modeled itself after Horn of Africa.

The group obtained nonprofit status with the help from Horn of Africa in July and opened an office in September. Horn of Africa covers the rent.

"Everything we need, we come to these guys," Madisa said.

Caption: 2 PICS
1,2. Saldo Hamadi (left) and Burey Mungani read about nutritional information at the Horn of Africa nonprofit organization in City Heights. Hijao Shongolo (below, left) and Isho Abdi (below, right) attended a presentation at the center, which has become a model to other refugee resettlement groups for its innovative programs, services and ability to obtain grant funding. 1,2. Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune photos

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