

Ummah Project

We are an open and diverse group of leaders committed to empowering Somali youth and their families by creating social, educational, health and leadership programs and resources to build safe and sustainable Somali communities.

Our work is to learn from others and bring more resources to the community so we are better able to lead with Somali youth. We partnered with Community Mediation and Restorative Service and created the *Somali American Leaders and Mediators (SALAM)* training specifically to intertwine restorative practices with Islam.

We tried really hard to listen to the community and make the youth leaders of the training. We come into this being mediation trainers and not leaders of the project. Youth will be leaders in providing preventative and restorative dialogs that connect Somali and non-Somali communities that will be an alternative to school discipline and judicial systems.



The work is moving quickly. In just two months through the Somali Youth Development fund, we developed curriculum, brought in partners, and convened a training.



We're growing, and we've learned:

- ❖ Stipends are great incentives; it directly addresses young people's ability to be there.
- ❖ Having a mix of youth, some who know each other and some who don't, is really important to start new conversations and raise awareness in our own community.
- ❖ Trust is key to getting youth here.
- ❖ Youth are seeking a safe place to talk to each other and with adults; they don't want to be talked at.
- ❖ Recognizing and honoring youth achievement adds credibility increases youth leadership.
- ❖ Our graduates have new skills and abilities, but have to exercise their skills; they want to keep developing and using their skills.



Youth engagement was more than expected. We held two all-day, intensive trainings over the weekend. Many youth arrived early, wanted to stay late, and were hungry for more. The two dozen youth who attended are an untapped resource; they have a willingness learn and motivation to serve our communities that many people overlook. It was evident for us when youth took it upon themselves to start an unsolicited waiting list of participants wanting training on restorative practices.

A lot of youth are looking for a place to belong, a person to help them find or navigate places. Still, they won't come to just any program. Word of mouth and personal connection in community is incredibly important. A trusted referral by peers is priceless.



We are figuring out how to tailor programs instead of creating our own, but nonprofit structure is limiting. For example, volunteerism is formalized and not accommodating to how Somali people want to engage. In order to find financial resources for

our work, we need supporters willing to let us try out our own ideas and put our experiences in context. In this new country, cultural responsiveness and sensitivity has to come from trust. It doesn't come from the outside. *Somali-led organizations are doing great work – and to grow, we need a variety of leaders and leadership models.*



Programmatic funding is insufficient for small organizations to grow or to sustain; there needs to be a chance for youth to keep using skills, to capitalize on enthusiasm of current participants and recent program graduates. The skills that these young people have acquired are necessary for understanding the opportunities here in the US – critical to figuring out who they are. It is our task to give young people the next opportunity, a chance to sustain their skills by connecting them to resources.

