

**Testimony of Thomas E. Smith
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July 27, 2011

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

**“Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim
American Community and the Threat to the Homeland.”**

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Thompson and distinguished Members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic. I will speak today about current efforts underway in Saint Paul, Minnesota to counter attempts by al-Shabaab to recruit and radicalize some of the young members of our community. I will highlight the Saint Paul Police Department's efforts to combat this disturbing trend, and will speak specifically to our cooperative outreach efforts, including a program we call AIMCOP-African Immigrant Muslim Community Outreach Program-which is funded in large part through a Federal Bureau of Justice Assistance grant.

This conversation is especially important for Saint Paul, as we have a significant Somali American population. This community is engaged, and has a keen interest and complex understanding of local, national and world events. I have found the majority of these men and women call the Twin Cities home and are proud Americans. Some among the community though, have become targets for radicalization.

It is well published that between 2007 and 2009, al-Shabaab successfully lured approximately twenty young Muslim men, many of whom are Somali American, from the Minneapolis/Saint Paul area to fight overseas in a terrorist war. This phenomenon was new, and represented a challenge that the Saint Paul Police Department had not confronted in the past. The idea though, that young adults could be enticed into something this destructive was not. This news was both troubling and disturbing, and although the trend had political and security implications that extended far beyond Saint Paul, our department made a commitment to counter this threat.

We have long worked to combat threats to our youth that have become all too familiar: alcohol use, drug abuse and gang violence. As we have committed to combating those threats, the Saint Paul Police Department committed to battling a new one: the potential radicalization of our Somali American youth. We believed that we could play a role in stopping this threat, and that our work, coupled with positive messages conveyed to our youth through strong families, legitimate social organizations and constructive religious messages could be just as powerful as the destructive messages delivered by al-Shabaab.

In 2004, the Saint Paul Police Department began to engage in serious outreach work with our Somali American residents. Though we did not know it at the time, this initial work would prove to be the foundation for more urgent work with broader implications. This evolved into AIMCOP, the African Immigrant Muslim Community Outreach Program.

In 2009, the Saint Paul Police Department applied for a Bureau of Justice Assistance grant to fund AIMCOP. The grant sought to capitalize on existing department outreach efforts with the local Somali American community, and cited a specific need - the need to prevent further radicalization of our youth by al-Shabaab.

It further cited specific strategies to combat this trend – targeted and ongoing outreach with our Somali American community, and coordinated work with partners such as the FBI Minneapolis Field Office, the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Minnesota, the Ramsey County Sheriff’s Office and several service providers including the local YWCA, the Saint Paul Intervention Project and the Muslim American Society. We were awarded the grant in 2009 and AIMCOP was launched.

Today both the scale and scope of AIMCOP and its related programs have seen significant growth. Our department still regularly meets with the Somali Advisory Council, and some 45 officers of all ranks are now intimately involved in our programs. These officers asked to be a part of this formal outreach work. After their acceptance into our program the officers received training specific to the work, to the mission and to the philosophy behind it. Officers developed and now lead, coordinate and directly participate in an array of activities with our Somali American youth. These include after school study programs, open gyms, arts and crafts programs and even camping trips.

Our Police Athletic League has over 300 Somali American youth participants who compete in soccer, flag football, softball and volleyball games that are organized, coached and refereed by Saint Paul Police Officers. We strongly believe that by creating these safe, diverse and ongoing opportunities for Somali American youth and the police to interact, that trust, cooperation, friendship and mentorship will increase, and opportunities for al-Shabaab to recruit and radicalize our youth will decrease.

We have faced some challenges while moving forward with our outreach work. Among those was the fact that Somali American women and girls were noticeably underrepresented in many of our initial programs. We now directly target Somali American females with many of our outreach efforts, including a number of programs that are led exclusively by women police officers. AIMCOP has enjoyed an increase in female participation and has benefited greatly from this expanded involvement and dialogue. We have also expanded our own understanding of our Somali American residents’ background and religion through specific training to our officers. In this, we have come to a better understanding that to effectively prevent and combat the threat of radicalization we need to think beyond our traditional law enforcement notions and strategies.

I have no doubt that AIMCOP and its related programs have helped us counter the threat posed by al-Shabaab. We have built strong relationships with a community once isolated, and we now work together to address challenges and solve problems. Somali American youth that may be tempted by an ideology of radicalization can now look to an expanded network of trust, including police officer mentors to provide support, resources and guidance to steer them in a positive direction. We find new examples every day where Somali American youth confide in their police officer mentors about their family,

their school and their own personal problems and issues. They also speak candidly about their own concerns for friends or family who may be on a troubled path or who may even be among those missing, suspected to have gone overseas to fight.

This outreach work has also played a significant role in some very important criminal investigations. In 2009, while participating in a mentor program at a local high school, I was approached by the mother of a 14-year-old Somali American youth. The mother was concerned her child was becoming recruited and radicalized. This information was turned over to our FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force and resulted in a significant investigation.

Also in 2009, the Saint Paul Police Department, through established personal relationships, was informed by Somali American parents that girls in their community were being sexually trafficked not only in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, but also in Tennessee and other states. This bit of information, passed on in large part because of an existing climate of cooperation and trust, was the genesis for a significant and large scale investigation that ultimately resulted in 30 federal indictments in Minnesota and Tennessee. At least one of those indicted was turned over to the FBI because of other concerns. United States Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Tennessee continues to work on this case. The majority of those indicted are from the Twin Cities and all were involved in Somali gangs. Beyond the indictments, this investigation led to the safe return of many Somali American girls to their families, the youngest of which was only 14 years of age. Somali Elders were briefed repeatedly during the course of this investigation and were asked to provide information in the future should this activity begin again.

Through these and countless other examples, I sit before you today and confidently attest not only to the successes of AIMCOP and its related programs, but also to the great future potential that this type of work holds. AIMCOP has captured attention from international agencies working on similar radicalization issues. The British Embassy has both invited members from the Saint Paul Police Department to the United Kingdom and conducted site visits in our own city. Recently, we were visited by United States Ambassador to Denmark Laurie Fulton who spoke about ongoing efforts and similarities between the Twin Cities and Denmark. Discussions continue and attempts to identify methods to benefit both the Saint Paul and Danish models to improve outcomes are underway.

Our department continues to evolve its programs to address the specific needs of our Somali American residents, and to counter the unique threat posed by al-Shabaab. I foresee a future where even more sophisticated programming bolstered by enhanced partnerships with additional agencies and organizations will continue to build upon the trust we have gained with Saint Paul's Somali American residents. The continuation of our work is an imperative part of a larger effort to counter terrorism and reduce crime.

As I conclude, I want to share a few thoughts. I am sometimes asked if I believe that our community can actually benefit from the Somali Advisory Council or the Police Athletic Leagues. These efforts do look far different than our traditional notions of police work.

To answer those questions I ask that they imagine, for a moment, that the police officer called to a housing complex to deal with a youth problem happens also to be those same young peoples' football coach-or math tutor-or the leader of last weekend's camping trip. And I ask them to further imagine that among those same youth are the sons or daughters of the Elders who regularly visit my office as part of the Somali Advisory Council. You don't have to imagine those connections because in Saint Paul they actually exist. These connections run throughout AIMCOP and they represent the very foundation of our outreach work. And in my experience, these connections pay dividends.

As Chief of Police, I expect my officers to perform their duties in line with three core principles.

1. *Keep the peace.* In this, we don't police to the community, we commit to policing with it, as we implement creative new strategies and initiatives.
2. *Promote public safety.* To do so, we commit to the development of strong partnerships with ALL of the communities we serve.
3. *Enforce the law.* I have come to firmly believe, however, that when we do the first two things well, we actually have to do less of the third.

As I examine AIMCOP and its related programs against these principles, I am further convinced that the program fits squarely within our overall mission to keep our community safe. I believe that through AIMCOP and programs like it, we will have fewer crimes to investigate, fewer threats to our communities to address, and fewer young people leaving our neighborhoods to fight and die in foreign lands. The Saint Paul Police Department looks forward to our continued outreach work and for the opportunity to play a role in combating the threat posed by al-Shabaab.

I thank the Members of this Committee for the opportunity to address you today.