

WE NEED MUSLIM SOCIAL
SERVICES TO TAKE CARE
OF OUR NEEDS

Texan Muslims Focus on Social Services

BY SILVEEN KHAN

THE MUSLIM SPONSORED HEALTH FAIR IN RICHARDSON, TEXAS HAS BECOME AN ANNUAL EVENT THAT IS EVEN BRINGING CIVIC LEADERS IN TOUCH WITH THE COMMUNITY. THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY CENTER (MCC) FOR HUMAN SERVICES HEALTH FAIR HELD ON November 8, 1997 served some 400 patients from the Dallas-Fort Worth region, and included visitors such city mayor Gary Slagle and Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Syeed, the ISNA Secretary General, and Imam Yusuf Ziya Kavakci of Dallas Central Mosque.

The community leaders in the area support the MCC, a branch of physician Basheer Ahmed. The 1997 health fair was sponsored by the Islamic Association of North Texas (IANT), Islamic Association of Tarrant County (IATC), Islamic Association of Mid-Cities, the Pakistan Society of North Texas (PSNT) and local Muslim physicians' associations. The medical services were provided by a group of 25 physicians and several health personnel on voluntary basis who provided an array of services from blood screening to breast cancer self-examination training. The Parkland Hospital of Dallas, the Red Cross, the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, and other health organizations offered health and educational services.

An interesting aspect of the health fair was a focus on medical problems and precautions related to traveling to Middle East, Southeast Asian and Far Eastern countries.

The Muslim community in the Dallas-Fort Worth area has been expanding at a fast pace over the last few years. Today, the Muslim population is estimated to be around 80,000



Texas Muslim clinic at work

in the Metroplex and suburbs. As the Muslim population grew, the need for providing services to the community was acutely felt and Muslim Community Center for Human Services was formed in 1995, says Dr. Basheer Ahmed.

The MCC is based in Arlington, a city of 290,000 located between Dallas and Fort Worth, and has an estimated Muslim population of about 10,000. The Muslim population mix in Arlington is highly representative with Muslims from South Asia, Middle East and African Americans, North Africa, Turkey, Iran, and South East Asia. The civil war in Somalia has brought a large number of Somali refugees. This is reflected in the makeup of the MCC Advisory Council which comprises Muslims from different regions of the world and includes community leaders of the Dallas-Fort Worth region.

The Muslim community includes a significant number of senior citizens and MCC is increasingly focusing on providing related services. A senior citizen picnic was held in fall

1996 where talks on health issues were also a part of the program. A series of talks were held last summer on Social Security and Medicaid issues, the recent changes in laws and their effects on the benefits of immigrants as a consequence.

MCC operates a 24-hour telephone counseling and referral "Help Line" and is considering a help-line for the needy. Volunteers manage it and problems related to the issues of health, employment, financial assistance and abuse, among others are sorted out, and assistance and referrals to relevant agencies is provided. The MCC is considering setting up a crisis hot line service for needy individuals in the near future. Trained volunteers for counseling and appropriate referrals will manage this hot line.

The arrival of a significant number of Muslim refugees from Somalia came to DFW region especially since late 1996, obliged MCC to hold workshops on social services and immigration issues. MCC assisted in settling the Somalians by providing

ings in the floor's common area.

Indeed, the common area is one of the most important elements of the Muslim Interest Living Community. One freshman resident believes that, "it is one thing to have a Muslim roommate, but without a common area where are you going to relax with other sisters, and where are you going to pray?" The common area of MILC is split in half, with one half serving as the prayer area and the other half as the "living room." Since the room is locked, community members have made their appliances such as microwaves, toasters, and bread machines (appliances normally forbidden in dorm rooms but allowed in the common areas) available for everyone. Others have offered their Islamic libraries.

MILC's organizers for the 1998-1999 school year are already facing difficulty establishing the community for next year. One factor endangering the future of the Muslim Interest Living Community is lack of numbers. The Housing office allowed the Community to operate below capacity this year, after some freshman who initially committed to living on the floor backed out during the first week of classes. This situation, however, causes the University to lose money on the vacant places, and therefore housing is unwilling to let MILC exist in the future except at full capacity.

The main opposition comes from Residence Life, which holds to the oft-invoked concept of "the freshman experience." Unwilling to let upperclassmen live in the freshman dorm where MILC is currently located, MILC will be reestablished in on-campus apartments, (including several apartments for brothers,) but the Housing office will not let freshmen live in apartments under any circumstances. Shaheen Kazi, a freshman from Oklahoma who is coordinating next year's Muslim Interest Living Community, says that the Housing office is "very opposed" to the idea of MILC because they believe that freshmen should have "the freshman experience" of "living in dorms and dealing with different kinds of people."

While the idea of learning to live with "different kinds of people" may sound harmless and even appealing

on the surface, MILC members agree that for Muslims it causes more harm than good, causing Muslims to live in an environment which distracts them from their desire to become better Muslims, and even drawing weaker Muslims away from Islam.

Lin says that living with non-Muslim roommates is "not appealing. The environment is not conducive to strengthening one's faith," and calls MILC "the best thing for a Muslim who wants to strengthen their imaan and live for Allah... The only way to do that is by living with A Muslim."

MILC participants are satisfied with their experience and feel that students in other campuses should also work toward establishing such communities especially at a time when coed living is taking a wider meaning.

Tasneem Jennifer Crooker, a native of Maine, is majoring in Arabic and Linguistics at Georgetown University. She served as a summer intern at ISNA headquarters during 1997 and is active in MSA.

financial assistance for which a fundraising program was held, clothes, and household goods. The MCC collaborated with government agencies and other non-profit organizations in this regard.

Despite the rapid pace of economic development and job opportunities in the region many people do not have enough to feed their families. MCC recognized the problem and launched a feed the hungry project in 1997 that supported the homeless shelter in Tarrant County.

MCC has been quick in recognizing the social problems that may face the community, and has been involved in placing the Muslim children taken away by Child Protective Services (CPS) with Muslim families. Toward this end, Muslim families have been contacted in the area for coming forward as foster parents and information has been provided regarding the process and issues involved. The MCC approach is proactive as well. It has offered several workshops on how to resolve family conflicts, child development issues, adolescent depression and its effects on family, and parenting.

MCC is actively moving towards setting up a health clinic for the community members who cannot afford to pay for medical care. Another project in the works is a center for abused women. In the words of Dr. Basheer Ahmed, "We as a community, have many organizations taking care of political, religious, educational and economic issues. What we do lack are social services to cater to our social needs. We do need Muslim foster parents to place Muslim children in their care instead of being raised in non-Muslim foster homes. The abused Muslim women have nowhere to go but shelters that are not necessarily suitable places for the dignity of Muslim women. To make it brief, we need Muslim social services to take care of our needs."

Muslim Foster Homes

BY BASHEER AHMED

It is a reality now that the incidences of child abuse and Muslim children being placed in non-Muslim foster homes is increasing. This is borne out by the incidents reported from Dallas, New York, Seattle, and recently from San Antonio, Texas. The situation is being addressed by several Muslim organizations, and ISNA has manifested its concern by establishing a Social Service Department that is now collecting data.

It is often blamed that Child Protective Services' (CPS) workers have enormous powers and have absolute immunity, and on occasions, they have misused their powers. While there is some truth in this statement, but on the other hand, in a majority of situations, they have no option but to use their power to save the lives of children who are abused, and to protect the children from abuse who live in the same environment. Unfortunately, abuse is not uncommon. A perusal of the daily news or a reading of the log of emergency rooms dealing with children shows the high incidence of such abuse.

Often the child abuse situation with Muslim families arises from cultural differences and language problems. In many cases, the CPS workers misunderstand the situation and act on an impulse, resulting in extreme stress to the family. The situation demands that the Muslim community should organize itself and be prepared to intervene. This will help in resolving problems before they mushroom into devastating situations.

The experience of the Dallas/Fort Worth area Muslims can serve as a learning experience. The community averted a tragedy through early intervention and managed to place the children with Muslim families. A family problem that occurred in the area in November 1996 led to the need for foster care for the children. The Muslim community stepped forward and placed the children with Muslims families where they will stay till the ultimate court decision. The CPS workers were very cooperative and appreciative of the community's efforts of placing these children with Muslim families. They, not only, keep the community updated about the progress of the case, they even agreed to approve the living arrangements where the children can live with their mother as long as the father, the alleged perpetrator of the abuse, does not visit the children.

The solution does not lie in simply blaming CPS and the legal machinery. Instead, the community needs to take practical measures to confront any such problems. It is imperative that every community that has an Islamic center or association prepare ten to fifteen families who are willing to act as foster parents for a short or a longer period of time.

The officers of the Islamic organization should register itself with the CPS. This will put them in situation of being informed when any Muslim family is involved in an alleged child abuse case. The CPS should then advise the family to contact the organization so it could identify Muslim families that can keep the children on a short-term basis. When the families are registered as foster families, their names and addressees are already available to CPS.

The organization should have the consultation of Muslim lawyers to help the alleged family. Additionally, if there are psychiatrists, social workers and psychologists available in the community, they can also help to bridge the gap between the accused family and CPS workers by educating them about the Muslim culture and religion. This will help in removing any misconceptions.

Once the local organization has gone through these steps and confronts problems due to the wrongdoing of CPS workers or legal authorities, the community should not hesitate in seeking assistance from national organizations. Today, ISNA, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), and the American Muslim Council (AMC) are some of the organizations that can help in mobilizing a massive campaign to correct the situation.

Basheer Ahmed, MD, serves as chairman of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services in Arlington, Texas.