



**The Somali Community is a Promising Economic Powerhouse In Ohio**  
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On July 1, 2009, the Governor of the State of Ohio, and members of the House, in recognition of the contributions of the Somali community to the state, honored the Independence Day of Somalia by raising the Somali flag at the Ohio State House along with the US and Ohio State flags. This was a welcome gesture from legislators and the state leadership for the enterprising Somali community, the newest Americans in Ohio.

There are more than 45,000 Somali Americans in Central Ohio according to the Somali Community Access Network, a community based nonprofit that provides services and resources to the Somali community in Ohio. The majority of these Somali Americans live in Franklin County which includes the City of Columbus.

The State of Ohio has the second largest Somali population in the US after Minnesota. However, Columbus has the largest concentration of Somalis in any US city. Somalis started coming to Columbus in the early 1990s after the central government in Somalia was overthrown by armed warlords who led the country into chaos. Since then, Columbus became a favorite destination for Somalis from Africa as well as secondary immigrants from other states.

In a 2005 report, the Community Research Partners found that Franklin County foreign born population has grown from 32,235 in 1990 to 84,854 in 2003. The study predicted that foreign born residents will make up 12% of the county population by 2010. A huge proportion of this growth is accounted for by Somali immigrants who become residents through the US refugee Resettlement Program. The Somali Community in Ohio contributes to the local economy in various ways:

**1. Economic Contribution:**

Columbus Ohio has more than 400 Somali owned businesses. The businesses vary in size, revenue, and the number of employees. Here is a synopsis of some types of businesses:

Malls: Global Mall, Jubba Mall, West Site Mall, Banadir Mall, Westland Mall, Universal Marketplace, Aaran Discount Market and more.

Restaurants: African Paradise, Banadir Cuisine, Cananley, Darbo Restaurant, Iftin Restaurant, Bilan Restaurant, Calanley Restaurant, Banadir Restaurant Capital Café, Safari Café and others.

Other types of businesses include: cleaning companies, track/transportation companies, travel agencies, cab companies, auto sales dealerships, auto service shops, home healthcare agencies, retailers, barber shops, communications dealers, employment service agencies, money transfer and check cashing, gold dealers, charter schools, and nonprofit community support groups.

Somalis buy goods and services from local businesses to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars annually. They buy properties, cars, trucks, businesses and other commodities. All these businesses and individual employees pay federal, state and local taxes on their incomes and on the commodities they purchase.

How do Somalis get all the money for starting these businesses you may ask! Somalis use an effective method of wealth accumulation which is compatible with their faith and culture. According to their Islamic faith, it is not allowed to charge or pay interest on money. If they borrow money, they are expected to pay back the same amount without incurring any interest. This facilitates investment and creation of new businesses.

Money is usually borrowed from friends or raised in an effective Somali system that pools resources together known as “Ayuuto” or “Shaloongo” where a number of people, usually 10-15, save a portion of their incomes every month or every pay period. For example, if each of the 15 individuals saves \$500, the total amount becomes \$7,500 which is given to one person who is ready to start business or invest the money. The process goes on for 15 months until everyone of the group gets paid \$7,500. If this group wants to start a business together, they can raise \$112,500 in fifteen months to start a business!

## **2. Professional Contribution:**

There are Somali doctors, nurses, lawyers, economists, engineers, architects, computer professionals, teachers, and entrepreneurs. Columbus is home for the leading minds of Somalia including the family of Somalia’s longest serving president, cabinet ministers, state governors, ambassadors/diplomats, professors, business tycoons and civil service employees. These people transfer knowledge and skills and inject it into the local economy.

Somalis are very hardworking and industrious people. Most young men and women work more than one job, run or co-own businesses and go to school! All this is positive for the economy.

## **3. Cultural Diversity**

The man who composed the Somali National Anthem, Ali Mire Awale, lives in Columbus! Every Somali knows the song “Soomaaliyeey Toosoo”! Sahra Dawo is a household name in Somalia and her songs are widely broadcast in Somali media and listened to by millions of Somalis. She is available in Columbus, Ohio to provide entertainment to crowds and at events such as weddings and festivals. Abdulkadir Hirsi Yamyam, one of the greatest Somali poets and writers of all time is buried in Columbus! The community added a sense of diversity to the entertainment industry. There are five Somali studios in Columbus.

Columbus is home to the Somali Documentary Project, a program that intends to capture the history of Somalia and specially the lives of Somalis in the Diaspora through photography. The project team is an example of diversity: Abdi Roble and Tariq Tarey,



two Somali photographers, joined hands with Dr. Doug Rutledge, who holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology. The project has produced its first book “the Somali Diaspora: A Journey Away” containing the words of Dr. Rutledge and photographs by Abdi Roble.

Olol Studio, a renowned producer of Somali films is also located in Ohio. Some of the bilingual movies written, directed and produced in Columbus include: Araweelo, Ambad, and Rajo.

### **Political Contribution:**

David Robinson, the Democratic Candidate for the 12<sup>th</sup> Congressional seat who received substantial support from Somalis in 2008 had told NPR “It’s an important number of votes. We figure there’s probably going to be somewhere between 350,000 and 400,000 votes cast totally for the 12<sup>th</sup> Congressional Seat, so 10,000 votes or so is an important constituency”. Robinson had won the Franklin County vote by more than 10,000 votes but he lost Delaware and Licking counties by a wide margin.

W. Carlton Weddington, the 27<sup>th</sup> District Representative in the Ohio House of Representatives, who successfully campaigned in the Somali community last year recognizes the size and the political influence of this community. Weddington was responsible for the raising of the Somali flag at Ohio State House to commemorate the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Somali independence.

In the 2008 US elections, the Somali community had actively participated in the process for the first time. The National Public Radio published a story entitled “Columbus Somalis Gain Citizenship, Head for Polls”.

To be able to contribute to the economic and social development of the state, more than 3000 Somali students are enrolled in institutions of higher education in pursuit of Associates, Bachelor’s, Masters and Doctoral degrees. A professor at Franklin University told SomaliCAN Outreach Newsletter recently: “I can’t recall the last time I taught a graduate or an undergraduate class that didn’t have any Somalis”.

The Somali community is a powerhouse in regards to its economic impact of the Midwest. The economic and political clout that the community wields is expected to increase in the next decade. It is the community to watch as it transitions from seeking help to giving hope and help to millions of Americans.

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