



About 400 Somali residents gathered in front of City Hall on Dec. 30 to protest the shooting of Nasir Abdi (opposite page) by a Franklin County Sheriff's deputy.

# Beyond the shooting of Nasir Abdi

Protests and threats of legal action followed the killing of a Somali man by a Franklin County deputy. But behind the story is an emerging problem: the need to treat East African immigrants—traumatized by a brutal civil war—for mental illness.

By Alice Hohl



COURTESY OF FRANKLIN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Four Franklin County Sheriff's deputies pulled into the Cassidy Village Apartments complex a couple of miles south of Easton at about 1 pm on Dec. 28. They were there with a court order to take Nasir Abdi to Netcare, a psychiatric clinic where the 23-year-old Somali immigrant had previously received treatment. The officers had been warned Abdi might be armed.

According to an investigative report, the deputies saw Abdi standing outside his apartment building, a Marlboro Light in his left hand and a steak knife in his right. The deputies approached, with guns drawn, and called for him to drop the weapon, but Abdi yelled back that he would kill them and raised the knife. Deputy Mike Wiley sprayed Abdi in the face with Mace, causing him to bend over and shield his eyes. When Wiley grabbed his jacket, Abdi stood and slashed at him. The other three deputies later told investigators they thought Wiley had been stabbed.

Abdi thrust the knife again at Wiley, who was moving away. Deputy Jason Evans, a seven-year veteran of the force, fired one shot, striking Abdi in the chest. He was pronounced dead at 1:29 pm at Grant Medical Center.

The shooting sparked a protest by about 400 Somalis at City Hall. Their anger was fueled in part by two witnesses who reported seeing no knife and Abdi's making no movement except to wipe his eyes. (The police say the knife matched a set found in his kitchen drawer.) Members of the Somali community also were upset when a grand jury in April cleared Evans of criminal charges, with leaders talking to reporters about legal action. Tensions were heightened when some police and residents, upset



Nasir Abdi was shot in front of his apartment at 3079 Cassady Village Trail on Dec. 28 by Franklin County Sheriff's deputy Jason Evans (top left), who was cleared by a grand jury in April. Remnants from the crime scene altercation included an officer's canister of Mace (right), a bent steak knife (below) and the casing from the bullet fired into Abdi's chest.



by the reaction, lashed out at the city's relatively new but fast-growing group of immigrants.

While Somalis and the police have been meeting to try to resolve their differences, the tragedy has exposed an issue with ramifications beyond the killing of Nasir Abdi. It's the suspicion that a significant number of Somalis are suffering from mental illness after fleeing a bloody war, living in lawless African refugee camps and moving to a drastically different climate and culture. And counselors and other experts say the problem is complicated by the fact that Somalis don't put

much stock in Western medicine.

Hawa Siad, head of the Somali Women and Children's Alliance, notes, "Little or no attention has been paid to... the background of a people who bore the brunt of a brutal civil war, and who still carry the scars."

**M**any Somali immigrants—now estimated to number up to 40,000—have settled in northeast Columbus, with some helping to revive fading north-side strip centers by opening small businesses. A building on Morse Road that once housed T.J. Maxx is now home to the

Global Mall, the brainchild of a young Somali entrepreneur. Inside the space filled with kiosks is Abdul Abdi, a clerk at a stall selling cellphones. He talks quickly into a phone in his native tongue, then switches to English to wait on a customer.

Abdul Abdi was a friend and distant relative of Nasir Abdi. He says Nasir began to show signs of mental illness after moving here from a refugee camp in Kenya in 1999 with his mother, two brothers and an uncle. He was hospitalized for more than a year at Netcare shortly after arriving here.

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But he recovered and was all right for a time, helping his neighbors at Cassidy Village, the aging apartment complex near Agler and Sunbury roads. At one point, Nasir held a restaurant job, Abdul says. "He wasn't a bad person," he says. "But when he was mentally ill he didn't know anyone," including friends and family. "That's where his problems came in."

Nasir Abdi's mother and brothers called for him to be picked up and taken to Netcare four or five times, says Fred Gittes, the respected civil rights attorney who has been hired by Abdi's family. He also had a police record, which included menacing and assault. In one case, in May 2005, an

he says. Ali says a Somali would never say, for example, "I am feeling bad today; maybe it is because my mother was killed several years ago on this day." Instead, he says, Somalis simply don't talk about the past. "We always say, 'The more you forget, the better.'"

Angela Plummer is a lawyer who works on refugee cases at CRIS, a converted motel on Sinclair Road where Somalis flock to seek help in finding work or reaching relatives left behind in Africa. She says Somalis have good reason not to think about the past: They have endured horrendous brutality in refugee camps, watched loved ones die in a vicious civil war and left behind children and spouses in their quest for safety in America. She speculates that

raged on and his friend never had a chance to return.

Southern says it's common for Somali men to want to go back home. In many cases, Somali women have found more freedom and power in American society, but the men left behind their status in a patriarchal society, as well as good jobs, political positions and familiar places where everyone understood their language. Such falls from power take their toll, Southern says. Often the best way she can help Somalis address depression and mental illness is to try to provide services to improve their lives; so Southern spends more time taking clients to job interviews or signing them up for benefits than talking with them in her office.

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**—Hawa Siad, head of the Somali Women and Children's Alliance**



18-year-old neighbor of Abdi told police Abdi threatened to kill him and punched him in the face. In other instances, Abdi's brother and uncle called police because Abdi wouldn't take his medicine, was sleeping with a knife under his pillow and threatening to blow up the apartment building.

In Somali culture, regular medical care, even for physical health, is not commonplace. Going to counseling and using antidepressants are unheard of. In fact, a person either is fine or crazy (and therefore institutionalized), according to several Somalis who help immigrants at Community Refugee & Immigration Services (CRIS). The belief that there is no emotional middle ground can make it difficult for people, such as Nasir Abdi, who are released from mental health clinics, but still need to take medication and attend therapy.

"It's really cultural that you just keep to yourself your problems," says Mohamed Ali, who works with refugees at CRIS. "Talking about it is not the best way to go,"

many may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Laura Southern, who counsels Somali refugees through a program established by Jewish Family Services, says, "There are a lot of them out there with depression. They don't trust taking medicine. They don't want to sit with me in an office and talk about their problems. Their view is Allah decides how our life is going to go and this is apparently what Allah wanted us to experience and we just go on. Who am I to argue with that?" (Sharif Ali-Hashim, another CRIS worker, says Somalis will allow elders at a mosque to try to help the mentally ill through prayer. In fact, Ali-Hashim, an elder himself, says Nasir Abdi's uncle asked him to "read Koran over him.")

Abdul Abdi says he and Nasir Abdi's family thought if Nasir could get back to his home country, his mental illness would subside. "We have a hope that if he goes back to my country—well, there is war in my country—but we were hoping he was going to get much better." But the war

"Getting a job can help a little bit," she says, but the harsh reality of making a life in Columbus earning a minimum wage can be more difficult even than dangerous refugee camps. "In the camps, there is that hope that conditions are going to improve," she says. "There's uncertainty about the future, but with that, there's hope. It's still Africa, so there's a lot of familiarity there. Conditions are crappy, but people speak their language and they at least know how the system works." After arriving in America, she says, "They are thinking their lives would be turning around. Now what? I'm here, and it's not happening."

She adds, "The group that's the most marginalized are young adult Somali males, 18 to 19 and through their 20s. A lot of them don't have the education to get a decent job. Some of them don't have a good command of the English language. They're just kind of wandering around with nothing to do. And they're having these mental-health symptoms."

**T**he series of events that led to Nasir Abdi's death started when his family members asked Netcare workers

once more for help. The healthcare providers determined Abdi was a danger to himself and others and got a court order to have Abdi hospitalized involuntarily at a Netcare inpatient facility.

The law-enforcement agency responsible for carrying out that order—as well as all other court orders—is the Franklin County Sheriff's Office. That's why the deputies were there to pick up Abdi even though he lived in Columbus.

Critics contend, however, that Franklin County deputies receive less instruction in working with the mentally ill than their counterparts in Central Ohio. Columbus police, for example, work with Netcare and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill to train officers in how best to approach and gain the cooperation of people who may be irrational or delusional.

"Even though this is the agency charged with executing orders from the probate court [to transport the mentally ill], it is the sheriff's office that doesn't have the special training," says Gittes. "Talk about crazy, that's crazy."

Sheriff Jim Karnes says some instruction is included in the basic police academy training that deputies must complete. "All of our officers and all the officers in the entire state of Ohio meet the requirements set down by the Ohio Peace Officer Training Council for training," he says. Karnes also notes that the department lacks the funding for extensive new training—although some instruction will be added as the result of meeting with community mental-health groups after the shooting.

Police say taking a mentally ill person

ly than an average person. "You don't walk up to someone and lay hands on immediately," he says. "You enter with the thought of care in mind, yet maintain officer safety. 'What's going on today? How can I help you? What's happening to you today? It's empathy, in short.' (Although training is available for free for police officers and sheriff's deputies, Bowling says Franklin County's complaint that it doesn't have the money for extra training is valid. Officers undergoing training are being paid, but aren't on the streets. For short-staffed departments, it can be a financial strain to pay other officers overtime to cover for their colleagues taking a training course—even a free one.)

Bowling also says everything changes when a mentally ill person is armed. "Verbal de-escalation is a wonderful thing," he says, "but if you bring your mouth to a gunfight, you're going to get hurt. If somebody answers the door and points a gun at you, we deal with it like we would any other police situation."

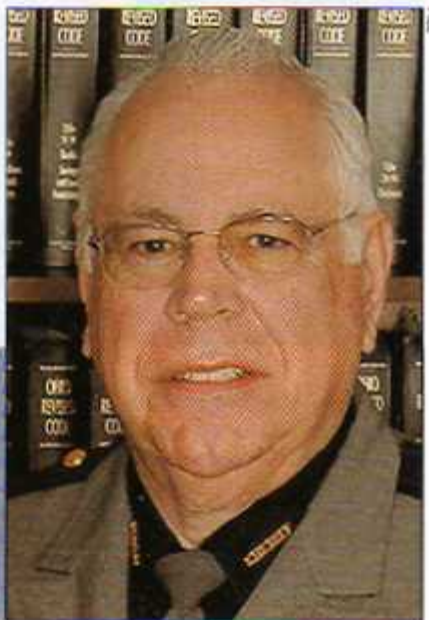
Nasir Abdi didn't have a gun, and some of the Somalis who gathered for that peaceful protest in front of City Hall held signs complaining the police used excessive force. While the cops viewed him as armed, dangerous and unpredictable, some Somalis saw Abdi, who was 5-7 and 160 pounds, as a small, confused man who was sick and needed hospital care. "A knife—it is not the biggest weapon," says Abdul Abdi, who believes his friend was not armed at all. But even if he did have a knife, Abdi says, police shouldn't have been threatened by it.

system, and some mentally ill people don't react at all to the smell or sting due to delusions, hallucinations or deadened senses. With the Taser, Bowling says, "They have no choice but to fall down." Karnes says sheriff's deputies are not yet armed with Tasers—again, because of funding and training issues.

The shooting and its aftermath set the Somali community and police on opposite sides. One police officer wrote a letter to the editor to the *Dispatch* calling the protesters irresponsible and ignorant and saying they were rushing to judgment of the deputy. A woman sent a letter to Karnes declaring she was "sick of all these foreigners coming over here and wanting to change our laws to suit them." The discussion forum on Columbus's [craigslist.org](http://craigslist.org) lighted up after the protest with comments from more than a dozen writers—many of them angry that the city has been providing services to the refugees for years and now they are complaining because police had to defend themselves against a Somali criminal. Some writers felt

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**—Franklin County Sheriff Jim Karnes**



to the hospital is not particularly easy. Lt. Chris Bowling coordinates training for the Columbus police crisis-intervention team, which responds to cases involving mental illness or suspected mental illness. He says some standard law-enforcement tactics taught in the police academy can backfire with mentally ill people. Shouting orders at someone, for example, often doesn't work. A person who is delusional may be hearing voices or can't comprehend who the police are.

Bowling won't comment directly on the Abdi case, but explains how he teaches officers to handle the mentally ill different-

Police, however, are trained differently. "A person within 20 feet of you—they can get to you with a knife before you can get your gun out of the holster," says Karnes. "In this case, Mace was even used to no avail. It's one of those where you say, 'Oh, shit.' If you come at an officer with a knife and they've already used the Mace to no avail, they only have one other thing they can do because they want to go home at the end of their shift."

Bowling says Tasers, which all Columbus police carry, have proven much more effective than Mace with mentally ill people. Mace works on the sensory nervous

the deadly shooting proved Somalis are troublemakers who often give police problems.

Historically, though, that hasn't been the case. Columbus police say Somali neighborhoods are not usually problem places, and a search of police reports in predominantly Somali areas shows mostly minor complaints, such as reports of damage to cars or squabbles with neighbors. "They really are a nonviolent group of people. For the most part, they don't drink or use drugs or steal. Their religion is part of their culture," Southern says. "Because they are an immigrant group, when something

does happen, it grabs people's attention."

Gittes says the police presence during the grand jury hearing on the Evans case April 14 hasn't helped relations. He says police "blockaded parts of High Street. You would think there was going to be a terrorist attack. And there was not a single demonstrator to my knowledge. Other than stereotypes and an automatic hostile attitude toward Somalis, there was no explanation for it."

Karnes, who oversees security at the courthouse, says sheriff's department supervisors did not know what to expect.

to be held accountable."

Jamal says that since Nuradin Abdi—unrelated to Nasir and Abdul—was accused by federal agents of planning a terrorist attack at a Columbus mall in 2003, most Somalis fear they are being watched and treated as terrorists by law-enforcement agencies. (Nuradin Abdi is awaiting trial.) "There's a terrorist war ongoing, and there is a serious case in Columbus, Ohio," Jamal says. "The community somewhat is fearful of retaliation from the police or from the sheriff's department, so they don't want to come forward and share with us what really hap-

penment needs to accept that we are a new community and give us a chance. Sometimes people do not understand why the police stop them, why they give them tickets. It has been a good discussion."

Omar says Somalis and police have had very few problems with each other. "We believe we're not targeted as a whole community. Honestly, we have to say that because this was the first incident. But it could have been handled another way, in a different way. That's what the general [Somali] public believe," he says.

Hawa Siad, also a member of the group,

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**—Hassan Omar, president of the Somali Community Association of Ohio**

They asked Somali leaders if a protest was planned, but received no information, so Karnes chose to be prepared. "It was based entirely upon the presence that was shown over at City Hall," Karnes says. "You set up for the unanticipated because if you wait, it's too late."

If police had a "knee-jerk" reaction to the case, as Gittes characterized it, Southern says it's not surprising some Somalis had a similar reaction to police after the shooting. "There's a conditioning that's gone on for them prior to coming to the United States," she says. "Having lived in a country where there were no rules, no laws, no protection, it was every man for himself. You kind of get into that survivor mentality—especially if you've lived in a refugee camp—that you have to protect your own. As we all know, mob mentality spreads quickly."

Omar Jamal, director of the Somali Justice Advocacy Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, says he also is working with Abdi's family (separately from Gittes). "His life was wrongfully taken by the people who were supposed to protect him," he says. "As an advocacy group we believe someone has

pened" when Abdi was shot.

However, chief deputy Steve Martin of the Franklin County Sheriff's Office says Somalis and law-enforcement officials are learning from each other since the shooting. Somali community leaders already have met several times in private with police and representatives from the Columbus Community Relations Commission, a city department charged with promoting racial, ethnic and cultural understanding.

Hassan Omar, who heads the Somali Community Association of Ohio, has attended the meetings, which consist of 12 Somali community leaders and 10 law-enforcement representatives from Columbus, the Franklin County Sheriff's Office, Mifflin and Clinton townships and even the FBI. "There have been a lot of discussions, on both sides. Some law enforcement do not understand the culture. At the same time, the Somali community does not understand the law enforcement agents' culture," Omar says. "We know that we are here, we are Americans, we are in Ohio. We are a new community and we are a law-abiding community and we need to accept the law. At the same time, the law

says she hopes the police will learn more about what the Somali immigrants endured before being granted asylum here. In an e-mail, she wrote, "This does not mean that I want to justify any illegal acts or actions committed by the Somalis, but we believe it is important for the representatives of the law enforcement and the community as a whole to know that violence and ill-treatment is what forced us to seek a safe haven in this country."

On the other side of the table, Martin says he has learned some new things. For instance, officers should avoid body language that has cultural connotations. "Like hand gestures—something that's not offensive to us, but is offensive to them, like motioning for someone to come back to your [patrol] car in a specific way."

Meanwhile, Nasir Abdi's family has kept themselves out of the public eye. Abdi's mother, Amina, did not want to be interviewed for this story. According to Gittes and Jamal, the reactions among the members are mixed.

"Some were very upset and said, 'What can we do?'" Jamal says. "Some of them are suggesting we forget all this and move forward and not revisit the past." ■

*Alice Hohl is an associate editor for Columbus Monthly.*