

# Voices of Seattle's East African Communities

Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

“Voices of Seattle’s East African Communities” is a community-driven foundational report guided by clear principles. The report accessed, prioritized, and documented community wisdom and voices. The process highlighted the diversity and strengths of the community. The facilitators intentionally chose not to pre-select important issues, but rather kept the discussions purposefully broad and self-determined. In addition, the process prioritized authentic and creative recommendations. The research also underscored collaboration between the community and partners like the City of Seattle and philanthropy, particularly when looking beyond the report and formulating next action steps. A summary of the report’s background, methodology, select findings, and recommendations can be found below.

## Background and Purpose

The Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) and the City of Seattle commissioned this report to capture an overview of the present issues and opportunities in Seattle’s East African communities. The overall results for this report were threefold:

1. To inform and guide OIRA and the City of Seattle in order to better analyze policy and to improve services and support to the city’s diverse East African communities.
2. To inform and guide community-based organizations (CBOs) serving East African individuals in their ability to more efficiently and effectively serve their communities, particularly in today’s nonprofit climate.
3. To educate and inform community, public, and private partners of the current issues and opportunities in East African communities.

Towards the overarching goal of immigrant integration, OIRA’s work focuses on strengthening communities, engaging communities, fostering connections, increasing access, and building equity for Seattle’s immigrants and refugees. Mayor Edward B. Murray encouraged the creation of this report because of its ability to expand our shared knowledge and to create a common framework from which both the community and the City of Seattle could work towards collective action. The hope is that this report can serve as a foundation from which efforts focused on more specific strategies can be successful.

## Methodology

The City of Seattle was open to co-designing this process so that it met the needs of not just the city, but also for broader East African communities and the community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve them. Using a series of interactive focus groups, progressive interviews, and research review, this report summarizes the community’s key challenges and recommendations for how to improve their quality of life. Rather than from a purely scientific ethos, the author approached this project as an opportunity to listen and to hear stories from a vibrant, diverse community. A set of thoughtful questions guided the interviews and focus group conversations that were also open-ended so that the participants could decide what topic they were interested in most. Additionally, this report documents and contributes community-driven data to the field. It helps to compensate for the lack of formal demographic data or research, and it aims to place equal value on the voices and expertise from the community themselves.

In summary, from late February to the end of April 2016, the author conducted one-on-one or group interviews with 35 key leaders in Seattle’s East African community, representing organizations working in the Somali, Somali Bantu, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Oromo, South Sudanese, and Pan-African communities. She also engaged in eight focus group conversations with small groups consisting of 15 or less Seattle residents. Overall, the author spoke with a total of 138 community members.

## Findings and Recommendations

The voices of Seattle’s East African communities are clear and resounding. Yes, we are proud Africans with deep ties to our cultures and homelands. However, we are also proud to be in the Northwest, and we want to work together with the City of Seattle to improve the quality of all of our lives. For too long we’ve focused just on our communities, making adjustments and learning new systems. We now understand that the systems also need to change to adjust to the growing diversity of our entire community. To do this, we must approach our work together creatively and with an equity lens, learning from history while also looking to community experts for clear answers. For our community, our youth and families represent all the good that is possible in the United States. And it is for them that we continue to build community across differences and struggle and push for change.

Though this report is broad, it does showcase numerous opportunities to engage and to co-lead efforts with a ready and organized community towards solutions that improve quality of life. This process identified nine issue areas as most pressing and impactful.

1. Housing and Gentrification
2. Economic Prosperity
3. Public Safety and Youth
4. Education
5. Family/Social Services/Health
6. Culture and Identity
7. Civic Engagement/Relationship with the City
8. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)/Community Centers
9. Data: Telling Our Story

Several themes also arose from this report. Under each theme below are highlights of a few sample recommendations from amongst the total of 138 community recommendations included in this report.

### We must begin first by recognizing and lifting up the East African community expertise and solutions that are already in place or are percolating and that need sufficient resourcing or support.

- Support and learn from the organization Ethiopian Community in Seattle’s new homeless prevention project as an innovative, community partnership-driven solution. (Housing, p. 17)
- Develop a partnership and plan to assist East African child-care providers and groups like Voices for Tomorrow so they can continue to provide services while working towards increased professional development, including a U.S. high school diploma and new accreditation. (Economic, p. 23)
- Support and invest in community-generated, restorative justice programs to address youth in the juvenile justice system, e.g. Horn of Africa Services pilot involvement in the Community-Assisted Diversion Initiative (CADI) or other methods to involve community accountability boards and CBOs in the juvenile justice continuum. (Public Safety, p. 29)
- Support authentic intergenerational projects led by trusted CBOs, like Somali Community Services of Seattle, to encourage positive relationship and educational outcomes. (Family, p. 41)
- Identify women and youth leadership opportunities and perhaps expand on Somali Family Safety Task Force’s work and Mother Africa’s work for women/girls. (CBO, p. 57)
- Understand existing investments across city departments and among partners in community-based participatory research (CBPR), led by East African CBOs and consultants, with the potential to expand. (Data, p. 60)

Race and equity principles must guide all approaches. East African leadership must be at the table, as they have not been engaged proportionately. “Do nothing for us without us.” Consider current disparities and create solutions tailored towards eliminating that gap.

- Set target and outreach plans for hiring East African police officers. (Public Safety, p. 29)
- Understand Seattle Public Schools’ cultural competency and equity goals to ensure it reflects the needs of East African cultures and religions. Encourage the city to share and to cross-fertilize ideas and lessons learned related to equity principles and application. (Education, p. 35)
- Review the participation of East Africans in City Neighborhood Councils, District Councils, boards, and commissions, and identify areas for targeted outreach and training. (Civic Engagement, p. 51)
- City of Seattle should consider investing in or creating grassroots, innovative funding pools like the Seattle Foundation’s Neighbor to Neighbor small grants program or United Way of King County’s New Solutions program. These funds invest in emerging organizations and ideas, provide technical assistance, prioritize funder learning collaboration, and have explicit equity goals to deeply reach into communities of color. (CBO, p. 57)

There is strong respect for East African-serving CBOs and the type of “life or death” support they provide for the community. There is strong capacity but also a desire to improve.

- Support the organization and capacity of groups like the African Chamber of Commerce of the Pacific Northwest or other East African small business organizations to unite business owners across the city. Groups like this can support the deeper needs assessments of African businesses, particularly by different sectors, in order to understand unique challenges and to design creative solutions. (Economic, p. 23)
- Increase investment in youth anti-violence work, especially targeting East African communities, while working alongside trusted CBOs committed to providing such programs. (Public Safety, p. 29)
- Fund critical senior meals programs led by East African CBOs. (Family, p. 41)
- Support the possibility of an East African-serving CBO summit or leadership retreat designed by the community, with the hopes of deepening partnerships and relationships. Or consider a less formal East African networking event where funders, including City of Seattle, could attend. (CBO, p. 57)

Some recommendations recognize the good work in development or in existence now and should be continued or refined.

- Continue to support and expand the Ready to Work program, which includes uplifting the role of or directly contracting with East African-based providers that form invaluable and continued relationships with graduates. (Economic, p. 24)
- Continue support of East African youth in the Seattle Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, including data on impacts of such work in the community. Highlight targeted efforts like the hiring of East African case managers in middle schools and evaluate their effectiveness. (Public Safety, p. 29)
- Re-examine existing liaison roles and job descriptions. Consider broader use of East Africans as strategic advisors with skills and who have broad support of the community. Formalize the positions and responsibilities. Use community to advise on the selection process of such staff. Examine liaison models in other cities for working in diverse immigrant communities and communities of color. (Civic Engagement, p. 51)
- Continue and deepen capacity-building investments to grassroots CBOs. Provide scholarships

to capacity-building training opportunities in the region. Consider formal partnerships with capacity builders such as Nonprofit Assistance Center, Wayfind, and others. (CBO, p. 57)

### Some recommendations involve public policy.

- Advocate for the “Carl Haglund” ordinance and others that protect tenants rights in the face of rising development pressures. (Housing, p. 17)
- Support and encourage East African parents organizing and advocating for local school boards, including Seattle, to pass policies making improved language services and bilingual education a priority. Connect with partners as necessary. (Education, p. 35)
- Further the work of Seattle Resolution 31613 (creating a Demographic Data Task Force) and engage East African CBOs and leaders in the subsequent task force or other engagement opportunities. (Data, p. 60)
- Organize community discussions about the city’s use of the term “African” versus “East African.” (Culture and Identity, p. 47)

### Other recommendations are unique and more “outside the box,” but should be researched and considered.

- Provide technical assistance to CBOs interested in temporary housing solutions on their private property, like Eritrean Community in Seattle and Vicinity. (Housing, p. 17)
- Form a specific healthy capital loan pool that East African business owners can access, especially those most at risk of displacement. (Economic, p. 23)
- Consider opportunities to recruit East African residents for city jobs—outreach strategies, partnership with CBOs, or other ideas including those involving OIRA’s ethnic media strategy. (Civic Engagement, p. 51)
- Explore the partnership between Seattle Parks and Recreation and the existing East African community centers to understand assets and needs each space offers. (CBO, p. 57)
- Convene discussion with Seattle Parks and Recreation/Van Asselt Community Center, East African CBOs that serve youth, and community leaders about increased youth programming. (CBO, p. 57)

### And still other recommendations suggest looking at what other communities have done to improve community conditions.

- Research alternative Islamic financing loan options and/or recent City of Seattle initiatives to promote such products. Look to possible national models for ideas that align with the HALA recommendation of “the city convene lenders, housing nonprofits, and community leaders to explore options for increasing access to privately funded sharia-compliant loan products to help these residents become homeowners in Seattle.” (Housing, p. 17)
- Consider developing programs focused on “brain waste” for possible city or state effort to create career pathways for foreign-educated immigrants. Involve East African CBOs in the design and implementation. Research and talk with administrators at the Highline College Puget Sound Welcome Back Center and the Edmonds Community College Northwest Washington Welcome Back Center about offering career re-entry support to medical professionals. (Economic, p. 24)
- Examine models like the African Development Center in Minnesota that, among other things, helps purchase capital equipment for businesses and sells these back to the business with a profit to be sharia-compliant. (Economic, p. 23)
- Examine and participate in national efforts such as PolicyLink’s National Equity Atlas, a website featuring multiple datasets, to make the case for inclusive growth and equity. Equitable growth

profiles in various cities can be disaggregated by nativity and ancestry. (Data, p. 60)

The learning and adjustment goes both ways. Community education is paramount, but systems must be open to adaptation and change as much as the community. This includes “busting silos” across city departments and bureaucracies.

- Support parent-school education opportunities, like those piloted by Horn of Africa Services, which also include similar education for educators and the school district about East African history and culture. (Education, p. 35)
- Understand and support Seattle Public Schools’ African American Male Scholars Think Tank recommendation: “provide professional development addressing racism and implicit bias, trauma, social justice, equity, and culturally responsive pedagogy.” (Education, p. 35)
- Connect East African CBOs with mainstream professional counselors/agencies to understand resources available to address intergenerational family violence and other forms of conflict. Support the creative programming that comes from such conversations, such as cultural mediation. (Family, p. 41)
- Include a cross section of organizations and government agencies in collaborative data efforts to work towards standardizing definitions and aligning strategies for data disaggregation. (Data, p. 60)

### Next Steps

The Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs will make copies of this report available to all the CBOs and community participants involved for their use and future reference. The City of Seattle looks forward to reviewing the results and recommendations internally across the different departments. The end result from this report is an action plan that will be shared with the broader community.

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