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Learning From Minnesota's Somali Fraud Scandal

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Power Line

THE MASSIVE public programs fraud committed almost entirely by Somali perpetrators has recently exploded in the national news. The controversy is centered in Minnesota, where the amount of money bilked from American taxpayers could prove to be as high as \$9 billion. But the scandal is spreading to other states as well. When Ryan Thorpe and Chris Rufo published an article in the November 2025 issue of *City Journal* linking the fraud to the funding of Al-Shabaab—a Somali-based Sunni Islamist organization that is designated a terrorist group by several



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A PUBLICATION OF HILSDALE COLLEGE

nations, including the U.S.—President Trump took notice and announced the termination of Temporary Protected Status for Somali immigrants. In late December, YouTuber Nick Shirley posted a 42-minute video that showed him knocking on the doors of Somali-run day care centers in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul area that seemed to have no children in attendance. The video went viral, quickly garnering more than 130 million views on X and 2.5 million views on YouTube. But while this story is new to most Americans, it is anything but new to Minnesotans and others who have been paying it the attention it deserves.

Long known for having a largely Scandinavian population, Minnesota is now home to the largest Somali population in North America, numbering roughly 100,000, most of whom are congregated in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The seeds of this community were planted in the early 1990s, when the State Department directed thousands of refugees from Somalia's civil war to Minnesota. Except for a dip in 2008, the immigration of Somalis into Minnesota has continued unabated, augmented by Somalis arriving from other states. The latter likely has to do with Minnesota's generous welfare and charity policies. As Professor Ahmed Samatar of Saint Paul's Macalester College was quoted as saying in a

2015 *Washington Times* story, Minnesota is “the closest thing in the United States to a true social democratic state.”

The massive fraud currently in the news was not the first controversy surrounding the Somali immigrant community. Around 2015, it proved to be a fertile source of ISIS recruits. The FBI's Minneapolis field office devoted substantial resources to terrorism-related issues. A September 2015 report of the House Homeland Security Committee revealed that Minnesota led all other states in contributing foreign fighters to ISIS. Reviewing the public cases of 58 Americans who joined or attempted to join ISIS, it found that 26 percent of them came from Minnesota. Of ten Minnesota Somalis charged with seeking to join ISIS in Syria, six pleaded guilty and three were convicted at trial in June 2016.

During the trial of the three Somalis who contested the charges, it became clear, primarily from recordings introduced into evidence, that although they gave the outward appearance of American assimilation, they hated America. They took advantage of educational and employment opportunities and moved into and out of the workforce at will. At one time, all three worked at a UPS facility in a leafy Saint Paul suburb, where they enjoyed watching ISIS videos of beheadings during their breaks.

Foreshadowing the fraud scandals of today, the Somalis involved in terrorism showed themselves to be sophisticated in their creative use of social welfare benefits. Two of four Somali ISIS recruits intercepted at New York's JFK airport while en route to Syria had used federal financial aid funds to pay for their travel. One financed his planned trip to Syria with a \$5,000 debit card withdrawal on his student loan account.

In the decade since, the controversy over terrorist recruitment of Somalis has receded and the Somali abuse of social welfare programs has proliferated.

Imprimis (im-pri-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

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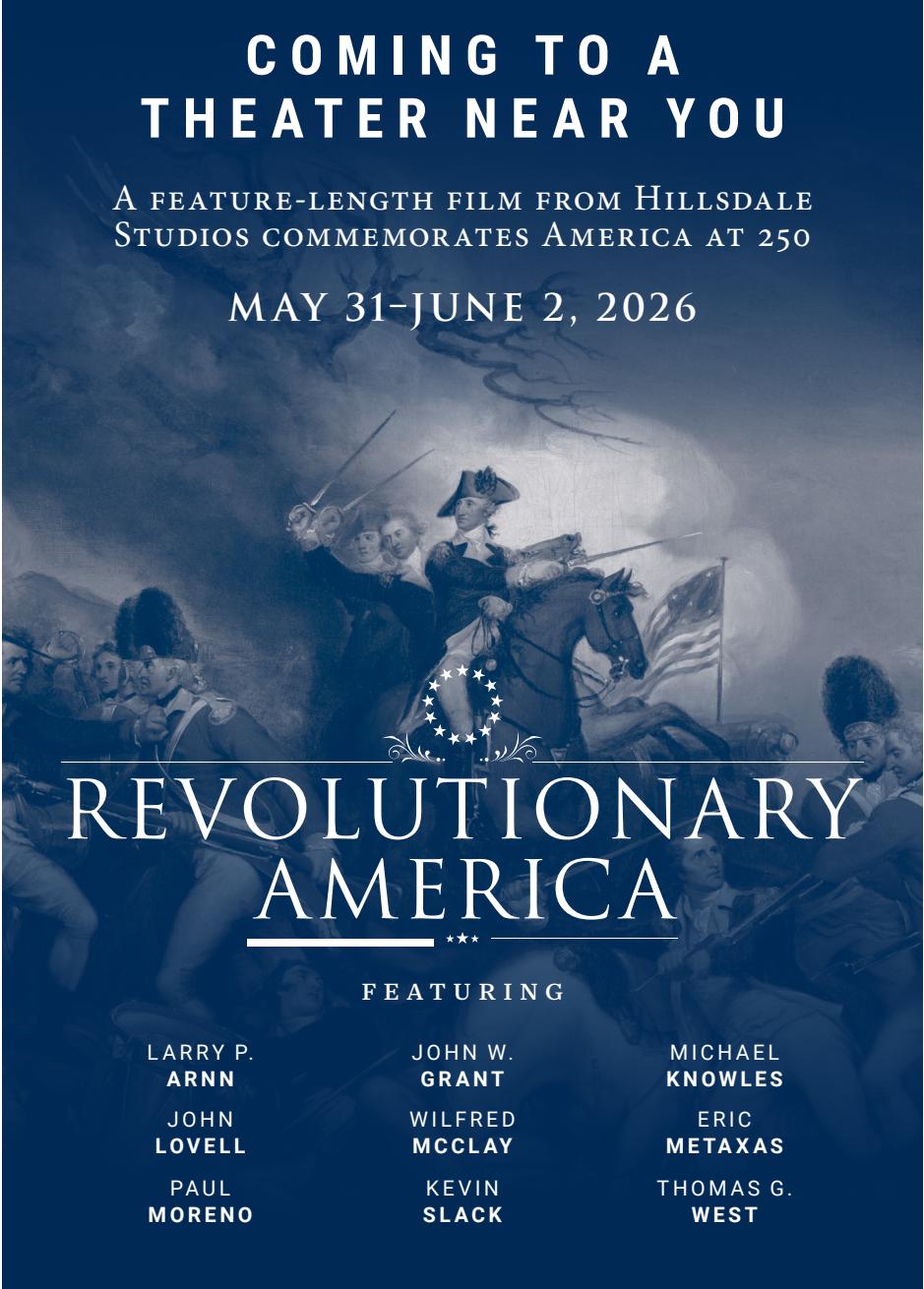
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CHILD CARE FRAUD

The defrauding of Minnesota's Child Care Assistance Program for day care services, although brought dramatically to national attention by Nick Shirley in late December, goes back more than ten years. Jeff Baillon, a Twin Cities TV reporter, reported on day care frauds in 2013 and 2015. A year ago this month Jay Kolls, another local reporter, went to two of the ten sites Shirley visited and reported that

one of them was guilty of 95 violations—including “no records for 16 children”—between 2019 and 2023. But taxpayer funds continued to flow to these programs.

An illustrative case that arose in 2017 involved Fozia Sheik Ali, whose day care center in south Minneapolis was suspected of billing the government over \$1 million for bogus child care services. According to Special Agent Craig Lisher, the FBI “found

records that she was collecting a significant amount of money for a much larger number of children than were actually attending the center.” Ali’s case had an international component as well. She used a phone app to charge Minnesota taxpayers for her stay at an \$800 per night hotel in Nairobi, and some of the illegally obtained funds were found to have been transferred overseas, although the FBI declined to specify for what purpose. Ali pleaded guilty in March 2018 to a charge of wire fraud and was sentenced to federal prison.

Minnesota’s Office of the Legislative Auditor issued a detailed report on child care fraud in 2019. On the question of how much had been stolen, the report restricted itself to amounts established in convictions. Because convictions were few and far between, that only came to between \$5 million and \$6 million. But the report concluded, citing the lax administration of the day care program, that the level of fraud was likely higher. Indeed! And the laxity continues. Jim Nobles, the legislative auditor at the time of the 2019 report, wrote a recent column in *The Minnesota Star Tribune* decrying the “permissive approach” of Minnesota’s state government that makes it “easy for fraudsters to steal” and questioning why nothing had been done over many years to “implement standard financial controls and oversight.”

FEEDING OUR FUTURE FRAUD

In that same *Star Tribune* column, Nobles wrote: “We now know that the fraud scheme used in the state’s child care program has been used frequently in other state human service programs.” A dramatic example of this is the case that has become known as the Feeding Our Future fraud.

Feeding Our Future is a nonprofit organization that served as a sponsor of sites like day care centers and restaurants that participated in two federal

nutrition programs. During the peak Covid period, from April 2020 until January 2022, Feeding Our Future and its sites and their vendors found it remarkably easy to bilk these programs by filing false claims for reimbursement supported by false meal counts, fake rosters, and bogus invoices.

Aimee Bock was the founder and executive director of Feeding Our Future as well as the ringleader of the fraud scheme. As the sponsor of more than 250 Feeding Our Future sites around the state, Bock certified the accuracy of the ludicrously inflated meal claims she submitted for reimbursement. While Feeding Our Future’s sites and vendors are mostly Somali—as are those who have so far been convicted in the trials involving Feeding Our Future—Bock is white, adding a multicultural liberal element to the massive fraud.

The free food programs were administered by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and funded by the federal Department of Agriculture. Operating under the law adopted by Congress on account of Covid, the MDE proved a remarkably easy mark. Feeding Our Future sites multiplied like rabbits, and funds kept rolling out the door. In 2021 alone, Feeding Our Future siphoned off nearly \$200 million of taxpayer money.

It is important to note that suspected fraud was often never fully investigated because government overseers were easily scared off by absurd claims of racism—charges that continue to be leveled even today.

In February 2021 the FBI passed on allegations of fraud in the programs to the MDE. In April 2021 a frustrated MDE official tipped off the FBI regarding her own suspicions. FBI forensic accountant Pauline Roase followed up in the ensuing months by collecting relevant bank records to track the flow of funds. FBI Special Agents Jared Kary and Travis Wilmer followed up

in the field. In the last six weeks of the investigation they posted surveillance cameras outside twelve Feeding Our Future sites that were supposedly feeding thousands of kids a day. The kids were nowhere to be seen.

UNCOVERING FRAUD IN MINNESOTA IS LIKE PLAYING WITH RUSSIAN NESTING DOLLS. MANY WHO WERE FOUND COMMITTING FRAUD ON A MEDICAID HOUSING PROGRAM “HAD ONE OR MORE OTHER COMPANIES THROUGH WHICH THEY BILLED OTHER MEDICAID PROGRAMS.” THE DETAILS OF THESE CASES WERE ALMOST INCIDENTAL TO ACTING U.S. ATTORNEY THOMPSON’S MAIN POINT—THAT “MINNESOTA IS DROWNING IN FRAUD.” “IT FEELS NEVER-ENDING,” THOMPSON SAID. “I HAVE SPENT MY CAREER AS A FRAUD PROSECUTOR AND THE DEPTH OF FRAUD IN MINNESOTA TAKES MY BREATH AWAY.”

On January 20, 2022, the investigation went public when federal agents raided sites in the largest such operation ever conducted in Minnesota. The following September, United States Attorney Andrew Luger called a press conference to announce the charges brought against the first 47 defendants in the case. Charges have now been brought against a total of 78 defendants. The latest of the 78 cases were charged this past November.

In the cases resolved so far, there have been 50 guilty pleas, seven guilty verdicts, and two acquittals. Five fugitives remain at large. One defendant has died. Thirteen unresolved cases await trial. Bock was convicted on seven counts of wire fraud, conspiracy, and federal programs bribery and will be sentenced to a long prison term. The total fraud in these cases comes to some \$300 million.

MEDICAID FRAUD

The Feeding Our Future fraud cases opened a window on scams involving several Minnesota Medicaid pro-

grams. After the FBI executed search warrants in one such case in July of last year, then-Acting United States Attorney Joe Thompson—who until very recently was leading both the Feeding Our Future and the Medicaid fraud prosecutions—called a press conference in September to announce criminal charges against the first eight Medicaid fraud defendants, all of whom are Somali.

These initial cases were tied to Minnesota’s Housing Stabilization Services (HSS) program, the purpose of which was to help people with disabilities find housing using Medicaid funds. “Most

of these cases, unlike a lot of Medicare and Medicaid fraud cases nationally, aren’t just overbilling,” Thompson said at the press conference. “These are often just purely fictitious companies solely created to defraud the system, and that’s unique in the extent to which we have that here in Minnesota.” The press release distributed at the press conference suggested that the HSS program seems to have been designed to facilitate fraud: “By design, the Program had low barriers to entry for new providers and for beneficiaries. The Program also had minimal requirements for reimbursement.”

Uncovering fraud in Minnesota is like playing with Russian nesting dolls. “Many of the owners of [the involved HSS] companies,” Thompson said, “had one or more other companies through which they billed other Medicaid programs such as the [Early Intensive Developmental and Behavioral Intervention] program, the Adult Rehabilitative Mental Health Services program, the Integrated Community Support program, the Community Ac-

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cess for Disability Inclusion program, [Personal Care Assistance] services, and other Medicaid-waivered services.” The details of these cases were almost incidental to Thompson’s main point—that “Minnesota is drowning in fraud.”

"It feels never-ending," Thompson said. "I have spent my career as a fraud prosecutor and the depth of fraud in Minnesota takes my breath away."

On December 18 of last year, Thompson called another press conference to announce charges against six more defendants in connection with Minnesota's Medicaid programs. The new cases involved allegedly fraudulent claims in programs for housing, autism services, and assistance for disabled adults seeking to live independently. "Every day we look under a rock and find a new \$50 million fraud scheme," Thompson said.

The total amount of money disbursed through these programs since 2018 is \$18 billion. Based on his ongoing investigations, Thompson estimated that as much as half that amount—\$9 billion!—may have been paid out on fraudulent claims. “The magnitude cannot be overstated,” Thompson said. “What we see in Minnesota is not a handful of bad actors committing crimes. It’s a staggering, industrial-scale fraud.” Four of the six defendants charged in December are Minnesotan Somalis, and those involved in the uncharged cases under investigation are almost entirely Somali.

POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Two defendants from Philadelphia, Anthony Waddell Jefferson and Lester Brown, undertook what Thompson called "fraud tourism." Having

heard that Minnesota's HSS program presented an easy mark, they set up in Minnesota to become fraudulent service providers. One wonders how word of this was able to make its way to Philadelphia but not to the State Capitol in Saint Paul, where the people's elected officials are charged with protecting the public interest.

In a *Star Tribune* interview, Thompson cast the net widely in terms of responsibility: "This fraud crisis didn't come out of nowhere. It's the result of widespread failure across nearly every level of leadership in Minnesota: Politicians who turned a blind eye. Agencies that failed to act. Prosecutors and law enforcement who didn't push hard enough. Reporters who ignored the story. Community leaders who stayed silent. And a public that wanted to believe it couldn't happen here."

Partly because it's a problem that the people can solve directly, I would focus on the politicians. Three in particular.

The first is Governor Tim Walz. In November 2020, Feeding Our Future sued the Minnesota Department of Education for suspending the processing of Feeding Our Future site applications—an action MDE officials had taken because they had good reason to suspect that Feeding Our Future was defrauding the state. The MDE was represented in this lawsuit by the office of Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, which resolved the lawsuit—not under court order, but voluntarily—by backing down and agreeing to continue processing site applications. Two years later in 2022, when the Feeding Our Future scandal erupted and indictments were announced, Walz falsely blamed a state district court judge—rather than his attorney general—for compelling the state to continue payments. This was only the first of many of Walz's dishonest deflections of responsibility that continue to the present day. Walz will never live down the frauds committed on the agencies under his jurisdiction.

The second is Attorney General Ellison himself. This past December he released a widely mocked video in which he declared, "Scammers think Minnesotans are easy targets. They are wrong." No, it is abundantly and increasingly clear that the scammers have been right—in large part due to Ellison's nonfeasance, as seen in the story of his failure to back the MDE against Feeding Our Future in 2020. Like Walz, Ellison continues to refuse to sit for an interview with a serious reporter to answer questions about what he knew about the fraud and when he knew it. Nor has anyone in the mainstream media made an issue of that fact, which is a scandal in its own right.

The third is U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar. Even if we leave aside the fact that she immigrated to the U.S. as a fraudulent member of the Omar family and later married her biological brother in her own Elmi family for further fraudulent purposes, we could still fairly describe her as Somali Fraud Exhibit A. She sponsored the MEALS Act that facilitated the Feeding Our Future fraud, and her congressional district served as its epicenter. She was a friend of Salim Said, Aimee Bock's co-defendant in the second Feeding Our Future trial. She filmed a promotional video at Said's restaurant that was introduced by Said's lawyer at trial, although it actually served to support the charges against Said. Yet despite these facts, Omar claims to have known nothing about the fraud.

Public programs fraud on the scale we see today in Minnesota—and to a lesser degree (so far at least) in other states—indicates a leadership class that has either forgotten or no longer takes seriously the idea that public office is a public trust. What more fitting time could there be than the 250th anniversary year of the Declaration of Independence to restore the moral power of that idea in irresponsible state governments like that of Minnesota? ■