

REIMAGINING
**MUSLIM
SPACES**

Understanding Effective Social Service

SHARE CENTER LEXINGTON:

A CASE STUDY



REIMAGINING MUSLIM SPACES

Dear Colleagues:

The goal of our “Reimagining Muslim Spaces” project is to produce research-driven recommendations to enable the development of a mosque that is:

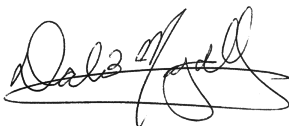
1. Welcoming: Inclusive and engaging
2. Well Governed: Effective and transparent
3. A Hub for Hope: A source of community service

To illustrate how mosques can serve as hubs for hope, ISPU identified four real life examples of American Muslim Institutions doing just that. Rather than simply providing theoretical advice, our researchers interviewed the very people who built these programs and institutions to identify the secret to their success and the wisdom gained from their struggles. Our case studies cover:

1. A **“Third Space”** with MakeSpace in Washington, DC
2. A **Free Medical Clinic** with the HUDA Clinic in Detroit, MI
3. A **Jobs Center** with the SHARE Center in Lexington, KY
4. A **Civic Engagement Program** with the Muslim Community Association in Santa Clara, CA

We hope these case studies will inspire and instruct others working to develop institutions that serve and uplift.

Warmly,



Dalia Mogahed
Director of Research
Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

Research Team



Faiqa Mahmood
Case Study Principal
Investigator & Author



Dr. Ihsan Bagby
Reimagining Muslim
Spaces Principal
Investigator



Afif Rahman
Research Assistant
& Data Analyst



Dalia Mogahed
ISPU Director of
Research



Sarah Buageila
ISPU Project
Manager



Stephen McGrath
ISPU Senior
Communications
Manager

*For more information about
the study, please visit:*

↳ <http://www.ispu.org/RMS>

*ISPU would like to acknowledge
all of our generous supporters
whose contributions made this
report possible, including:*

- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- The Pillars Fund
- Raghieb Family Foundation
- Dr. Tharackandathil Ooran Shanavas
- Amer Haider Charitable Fund
- Haytham and Banan Obeid



Contents

Executive Summary	01
Introduction	02
SHARE Center: The Beginning	03
Emergence of an Idea	03
Initial Planning and Implementation	04
Early Leadership	05
How the SHARE Center Operates	07
Service and Facility	07
Numbers Served and Demographics	09
Organizational Structure and Funding	11
Environment and Partnerships	12
Looking Back, Looking Ahead	14
Challenges	14
Lessons Learned From This Report	15
End Notes	17

Executive Summary

The SHARE Center in Lexington, Kentucky, is a Muslim-run community social service center. It has been effectively providing economic assistance in a low-income neighborhood since 2011. The SHARE Center offers employment services primarily for former inmates. Other services include a food and clothing bank, a free medical clinic, food programs, and referral services to other community service providers.

In this report, using the SHARE Center as a case study, the following lessons can be derived for communities hoping to launch similar projects.

- 1. Have a clear mission and vision for the project, and ensure buy-in from the Muslim community by effectively communicating the vision.** The success of the SHARE Center is deeply rooted in the support from the Muslim community, which has continued to financially back the project through all stages of its evolution. The SHARE Center was initially supposed to provide services to only the Muslim community. And though the SHARE Center currently provides services to people of all faiths, with Muslims but a small percentage of the clientele, the Muslim community's support has remained constant. In fact, all financial support of the SHARE Center comes from the Muslim community.
- 2. Coalitions that bring together a diverse set of actors are an essential ingredient in starting and maintaining social service organizations.** For the SHARE Center, that partnership included African American Muslims and first-generation immigrant Muslims. In this case, African American Muslims bring their passion, vision, and expertise, while immigrant Muslims often provide financial and professional resources. In Lexington, that healthy coalition already existed within a mosque,^a Masjid Bilal, which was an incubator for the SHARE Center.
- 3. Assess local community needs and interest, and take the program to a location where it is needed.** The SHARE Center began with an internal debate on what services to provide and to whom to provide them. The services offered by the SHARE Center reflect the most urgent needs of its neighborhood. One of the major factors behind its success is the SHARE Center's close proximity to halfway houses in a low-income neighborhood. The decision was made to direct services to the entire neighborhood and to the halfway houses in particular. Community reentry programs thus became a priority.
- 4. Actively recruit community members with a diverse and broad spectrum of needed expertise.** Once the SHARE Center decided to focus on sponsoring community reentry programs, Board Member Dr. Ihsan Bagby actively recruited Saburah Dixon El-Amin to lead the center because she personally understood the needs of SHARE's target population. All members of the SHARE Board of Trustees agree that Saburah's involvement has been the single most important element behind SHARE's continued success. However, organizations that are too heavily reliant on one person for their effectiveness can face serious challenges when that person leaves. As a result, organization leadership must adequately prepare for such a possibility so that the organization does not collapse with the departure of one individual.
- 5. Diversify clientele and income, but maintain the Muslim identity of the project.** The SHARE Center serves mostly non-Muslim clients, and the volunteer base includes people of all faiths. Yet the SHARE Center is viewed as a Muslim organization because leadership and

^a Both *mosque* and *masjid* can be used to indicate a Muslim place of worship.

funding comes from the Muslim community. Although the SHARE Center is keen to tap into government funding, it is also determined to maintain this identifying link to the Muslim community.

6. **Empower community members to launch initiatives and encourage the idea of community service as *dawah*.**^b The SHARE Center strives to serve as a platform for Muslim community service ideas brought forward by members of that same community. Programs such as the weekly free lunch and free medical clinic were conceived of and executed by community members with the SHARE Center providing space and some administrative support.
7. **Hire at least one staff member.** For the SHARE Center, having Saburah Dixon El-Amin on board as a paid executive director of the center has been instrumental in the SHARE Center's success. This has had a wide-ranging effect on operations, from ensuring the center is open at least four days a week to having a stronger community presence.
8. **Cultivate a strong financial base and ensure transparency.** The SHARE Center continues to flourish because it has the strong and reliable backing of affluent Muslims in the community and because the SHARE Center makes an effort to effectively communicate its mission and impact to its donors on a regular basis. For instance, donors and Muslim community members regularly receive an annual report that provides details of the current programs; the number of people served; and details of the center's annual budget, income, and expenses. Transparency and regular communication ensure continued support.
9. **Build relationships and partnerships with other community organizations.** Many of SHARE's most effective programs, such as the annual job fair, have been a success because of effective partnerships. The employment services, food programs, and health clinic all rely on effective partnerships for providing services and ensuring connections with those who can benefit from SHARE's services.

Introduction

American Muslim Islamic centers and mosques often serve as more than just places of worship by placing a major emphasis on community service. The mosques and Islamic centers that are successful in doing this not only positively affect the lives of people of all faiths in their surrounding area but also play a major role in strengthening the place of Islam in America. One such example is the story of the SHARE Center in Lexington, Kentucky, a Muslim-run community social service center that has been effectively providing economic assistance to people in low-income neighborhoods.

American Muslim Islamic centers and mosques often serve as more than just places of worship by placing a major emphasis on community service. The mosques and Islamic centers that are successful in doing this not only positively affect the lives of people of all faiths in their surrounding area but also play a major role in strengthening the place of Islam in America.

^b Dawah: Inviting people to Islam; outreach/education on Islam.

SHARE Center: The Beginning

The SHARE (Services for Human Advancement and Resource Enhancement) Center grew out of Masjid Bilal, the oldest mosque in Lexington, Kentucky. Masjid Bilal was established in 1976 by African American Muslims who were associated with the leadership of Imam W. Deen Mohammed. In the 1980s, the founding African Americans welcomed first-generation immigrant Muslims into the mosque, and Masjid Bilal became a very diverse community, evenly divided between African Americans, Arabs, and South Asians, with a significant number of West Africans and Indonesians. Masjid Bilal's vision is "to develop and sustain a faithful, effective, and influential Islamic Community in Greater Lexington in accordance with the *Quran*^c and *Sunnah*."^d1 According to its website, Masjid Bilal's mission is "to serve the religious and social needs of Muslims, to improve the understanding of Islam, and to be involved with the Lexington community for the betterment of society."² Regular services include the five daily prayers, *halaqa*^e programs, and a Sunday School.

From 1976 to 2005, Masjid Bilal was located in the West End neighborhood of Lexington, an impoverished, predominantly African American neighborhood. By all relevant socioeconomic indicators, the ZIP code ranks as the least well off in the area. After Masjid Bilal moved to a new building, it rented out the old building to the SHARE Center.

Emergence of an Idea

The idea for the SHARE Center was galvanized around 2009, when several members of the Masjid Bilal Board of Directors attended a conference hosted by the Muslim Alliance of North America (MANA). MANA is a national network of mosques, Muslim organizations, and individuals committed to working together to address the needs of the inner-city Muslim community.³ Founded by the prominent American Muslim leader Imam Siraj Wahhaj, MANA is committed to issues and concerns that especially affect African American Muslims, a segment of the Muslim community the organization believes has been largely neglected.⁴ MANA aims "to establish the strong presence of viable, healthy and dynamic Muslim communities, ... and to call humanity actively and systematically to the message of Islam." Thus, MANA aims to inspire Muslims with the message of meaningful community service as an act of worship and dawah.

^c Quran: Central religious text of Islam, which Muslims believe to be a revelation from God.

^d Sunnah: The "path" or "example" of the Prophet Muhammad.

^e Halaqa: A religious study circle.

One of the Masjid Bilal board members at the MANA conference was Dr. Ihsan Bagby, a prominent community leader, a University of Kentucky professor, and an African American Muslim who embraced Islam in 1969 after being inspired by the teachings of Malcolm X:

Malcolm X touched our lives and opened up for us the possibility of Islam, and a vision of Islam, an activist Islam, that was going to be the foundation for the [effort to] uplift black people. Our vision was of a Muslim community that would be caring for the streets, would be caring for black people, and would be trying to help in any way possible to uplift them, to help them, to address their needs.⁵

Our vision was of a Muslim community that would be caring for the streets, would be caring for black people, and would be trying to help in any way possible to uplift them, to help them, to address their needs.

MANA and Imam Siraj's message resonated deeply with Dr. Bagby and other Masjid Bilal members:

Imam Siraj clearly put his finger on this issue when he said that we are children of Malcolm X; [that] was how we came to Islam, but as we tried to authenticate our Islamic credentials, we got away from [Islamic activism], to a certain extent. And [Imam Siraj] argued that we need to reintegrate that aspect [of activism] into our individual and collective life as Muslims.⁶

One of the mechanisms through which MANA encourages community service is the SHARE Center, a national network of autonomous Muslim social service centers, each responding to its own community's needs. At present, there are three SHARE Centers in the United States, each operating independently. Soon after attending the 2009 MANA conference, Dr. Bagby decided to launch a SHARE Center in Lexington.

Initial Planning and Implementation

Dr. Bagby began the planning process by calling a community meeting in Masjid Bilal to garner community support for the idea and to assess community needs. The Masjid Bilal community is not only ethnically diverse, but also a good mix of young professionals, physicians, second-generation college students, and community activists. Dr. Bagby's idea was met with great enthusiasm. It was agreed that for any kind of social service center, Masjid Bilal's old property, located in one of the lowest-income neighborhoods in Lexington, would be ideal. Masjid Bilal had relocated and the building was vacant. Masjid Bilal agreed to rent the property to the SHARE Center for \$1 a year, and the project moved to the next phase.

Overcoming Setbacks

Masjid Bilal's old building had been unoccupied for a few years and needed extensive renovations. This was one of the first significant challenges faced by SHARE. The fundraising and construction work took almost two years. Soon after renovations began, a fire on the property damaged one-third of the building. Despite this setback, the initial team was able to raise its target of \$60,000 for the construction, and some community members volunteered services such as painting and tile work to speed up the project. Finally, on Martin Luther King Day in January 2011, the SHARE Center opened its doors by hosting a Muslim community service day and open house, welcoming community members of all faiths. As part of the grand opening, members of the Muslim community participated in a neighborhood cleanup; handed out flyers in the neighborhood; and invited people in for coffee, donuts, and a chance to learn more about SHARE Center services. Since the initial opening, the SHARE Center has regularly hosted a Muslim community service day on Martin Luther King Day.

Because of the SHARE Center's location, which shares a neighborhood with a number of halfway houses, it was agreed that social services that focus on community reentry for ex-offenders would have the most impact. The SHARE Center envisioned providing direct services and referrals to other institutions aimed at helping former inmates gain employment. The initial team of SHARE Center members did not start out with the aim of providing employment services; instead, there was an urge among the community members to do something to uplift the lives of people around them in a sustainable way. However, after initial research and discussions, it was agreed that employment services fit perfectly with the SHARE Center's vision of bringing a meaningful improvement to the lives of the people in the community.

[A]fter initial research and discussions, it was agreed that employment services fit perfectly with the SHARE Center's vision of bringing a meaningful improvement to the lives of the people in the community.

Early Leadership

The initial team that came together to make the SHARE Center a reality consisted of activists from Masjid Bilal who had been inspired by Imam Siraj Wahaj's call to revive the legacy of Malcolm X. Although the initial group consisted entirely of African American Muslims, that circle quickly grew to reflect the Muslim community's diversity and interests. The expanded team included many young students from the University of Kentucky, as well as physicians of Pakistani and Iraqi descent. One particular team member that most people credit as the engineer behind the center's success is Saburah

Dixon El-Amin, the current executive director of the SHARE Center. In Dr. Bagby's words, "one person that has been involved with us from the very beginning, is the key person at SHARE and the sole reason SHARE has been unbelievably successful in my own eyes, is Sister Saburah."⁷

Before coming to SHARE, Executive Director Saburah Dixon El-Amin, 56, had a tough life on the streets in Lexington. She spent many years selling drugs, was eventually arrested, and spent more than ten years in federal prison.⁸ As an inmate at age 39, Saburah decided to make a change: it was in prison that she embraced Islam and enrolled in counseling and GED and business management classes. In 2007, she was released to a halfway house in Lexington, under orders to get a job or return to prison. This is when Saburah learned first-hand the difficulty and dilemma faced by most ex-offenders as they try to change their lives and reintegrate into their communities. Thus when the SHARE Center was launched, Dr. Bagby approached Saburah to join the team. Saburah joined initially as a volunteer and then became the sole full-time, paid staff member at SHARE.

Due to her keen understanding of the needs of ex-offenders and her strong local community network, Saburah has, over the years, consistently brought a unique and valuable skill set to SHARE that continues to propel the center toward success. According to Tahirah Abdullah, one of the earliest members of the SHARE team:

[One of] the major things that made the SHARE Center successful was the tailoring of services to the needs of the community that it was trying to serve. Having Sister Saburah on the team was a huge piece—having somebody who was both a part of the local community and part of the Muslim community. Sister Saburah was also a person who would have said that there was a time she could have used the services that the

SHARE Center was offering. So it was like she knew what the community needed, she knew what a person who's coming out of prison needs to get back on their feet. So having her at the core was crucial to getting the SHARE Center established.⁹

[One of] the major things that made the SHARE Center successful was the tailoring of services to the needs of the community that it was trying to serve. Having Sister Saburah on the team was a huge piece—having somebody who was both a part of the local community and part of the Muslim community.

Saburah played a key role in SHARE's decision to focus on employment services and community reentry. Once the decision was taken, Saburah remained critical to implementing the program and ensuring it has a continued, positive effect on the community. However, organizations that are too heavily reliant on one person for their effectiveness can face serious challenges when that person leaves. As a result,

organization leadership must adequately prepare for such a possibility so that the organization does not collapse with the departure of one individual. To continue its current trajectory of success, the SHARE Center leadership will also need to ensure it takes steps in this direction.

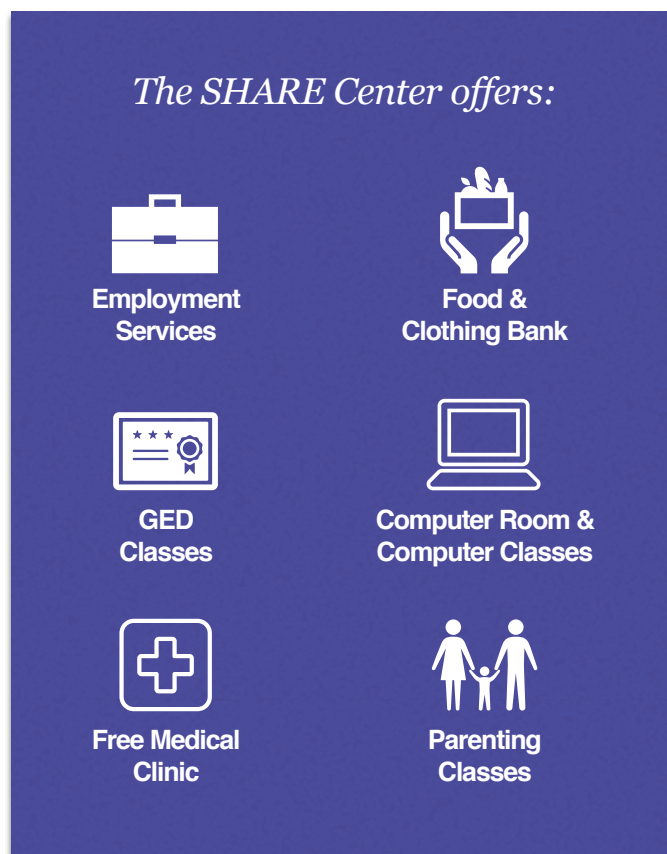
How the SHARE Center Operates

The SHARE Center is open from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The SHARE Center’s motto is “serving Allah by serving others.” Its mission is “to assist in the development of individual, family, and community self-sufficiency, and to provide the tools and guidance to individuals so that they can become healthy, whole, righteous human beings.” The SHARE Center provides social services to anyone who walks through its door.

Services and Facility

The SHARE Center addresses the needs of all clients, either directly or through referrals. There is, however, a strong focus on the central idea of easing and facilitating the transition of ex-offenders back into their local communities. At the same time, there is a focus on empowering Muslim community members to take initiative and to encourage community service.

At present, the SHARE Center is housed in a modest-sized building consisting of a small reception area, a computer room, an open space for the food and clothing bank, two small medical examination rooms, a reception area for the clinic, offices, and a kitchenette.



All staff members other than the executive director are volunteers. A reliable stream of volunteers is ensured via partnerships with three community organizations in particular: Bluegrass Community and Technical College, which allows students in the Work-Learn Program to work as volunteers, the Senior Citizens Volunteer Program, and the state welfare program for women (K-TAP). The volunteers are trained by SHARE and, in some cases, are paid by the partnering organization. At any given time, the

SHARE Center has between two to five volunteers to help with the operations. Most volunteers are from non-Muslim organizations. Other volunteers include students from the Muslim Students Association and non-Muslim students from the University of Kentucky.

Currently, the SHARE Center offers employment services (including an annual job fair), a food and clothing bank, GED classes, a computer room and classes, a free medical clinic, and parenting classes. In addition, SHARE organizes a monthly dinner at a neighborhood addiction center and a homeless shelter for men. The SHARE Center also hosts an annual day of community service and an annual fundraiser dinner. The free medical clinic is a recent addition to its services, launched in September 2015.

Employment Services

When a client visits the SHARE Center, a staff member will assess the client's needs and skills, and match them to an appropriate service, either at SHARE or elsewhere. The SHARE Center maintains an up-to-date list of local employers who are willing to hire ex-offenders. The executive director regularly calls local businesses to ask about their hiring policies so that clients aren't sent on fruitless searches. In the process, the SHARE Center also builds relationships with employers so that when suitable openings are available, the employers sometimes inform the SHARE Center. Some organizations with which the SHARE Center has built such relationships are the Lexington police department, the corrections department, the mayor's office, and many local hotels and hospitals. Currently, the SHARE Center has an average success rate of placing more than 55 percent of the candidates it sends for job referrals.

The 2015 job fair hosted 131 people and 12 companies, including Xerox, the Lexington Department of Corrections, and Marriott, Inc. A SHARE Center follow-up survey showed that 50 people were hired through the job fair.

Employment services include assistance writing a résumé and interview preparation. The SHARE Center has hosted workshops on job preparation and also provides one-to-one job counseling. Even the clothing bank aims to provide job applicants with business casual attire that they can use for job interviews.

The annual job fair is a prominent feature of the employment services and has been held regularly since 2012. The 2015 job fair hosted 131 people and 12 companies, including Xerox, the Lexington Department of Corrections, and Marriott, Inc. A SHARE Center follow-up survey showed that 50 people were hired through the job fair.¹⁰

Food Programs

The SHARE Center runs a food bank stocked with canned food and dried items. Once a month, in partnership with the Association of Physicians of Pakistani Descent of Kentucky and Indiana, the SHARE Center provides dinner for the Hope Center, the largest recovery center and homeless shelter in Lexington. A total of 150 to 200 people receive dinner. Mainly Muslim volunteers serve the meal.

In 2015, a new weekly free lunch program was launched, an initiative of Muslim students who attend Masjid Bilal. Sponsored by the Muslim Students Association and the Islamic Society of Central Kentucky, an umbrella organization for mosques in the area, students and SHARE personnel distribute more than 100 meals outside the SHARE Center every week. All donations for the program come from the Muslim community.

Free Medical Clinic

In September 2015, the SHARE Center launched a free medical clinic on its premises. The initiative is led by young professionals and students in the Muslim community, and was prompted by the stark contrast in access to quality care in the area. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 39.6 percent of individuals, 31.2 percent of families, and 51.3 percent of children in the area fall below the federal poverty line, and the nearest health care provider, the Fayette County Health Department, closed its clinic recently, leaving many in the area without a viable option for obtaining primary care.¹¹ The SHARE Center Free Medical Clinic currently offers basic primary care and diagnostic services, insurance sign-ups, vaccinations, job/school physicals, and basic laboratory testing. In addition, the clinic staff provides referrals to a primary care office where patients can establish long-term care. The clinic also has a KYNect Officer on staff who will assist clients in signing up for insurance offered through the Affordable Care Act.¹²

The clinic is open every other Saturday, 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and is staffed by 11 volunteers.

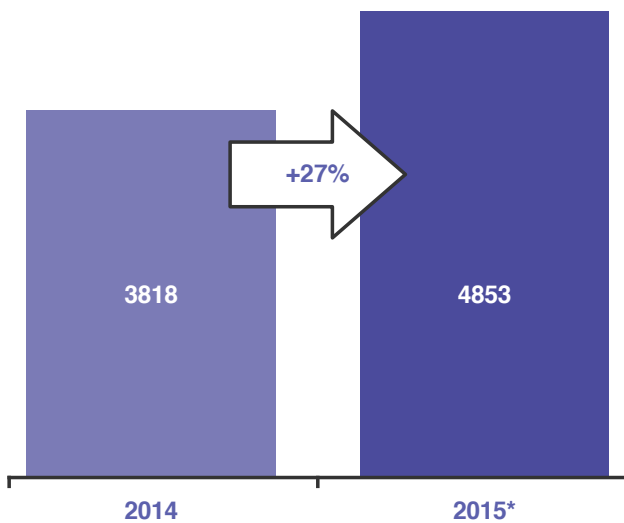
According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 39.6 percent of individuals, 31.2 percent of families, and 51.3 percent of children in the area fall below the federal poverty line, and the nearest health care provider, the Fayette County Health Department, closed its clinic recently, leaving many in the area without a viable option for obtaining primary care.

Numbers Served and Demographics

By most estimates, the SHARE Center is a thriving organization, serving a growing clientele. In 2014, the SHARE Center served a total of 3,818 people through its various

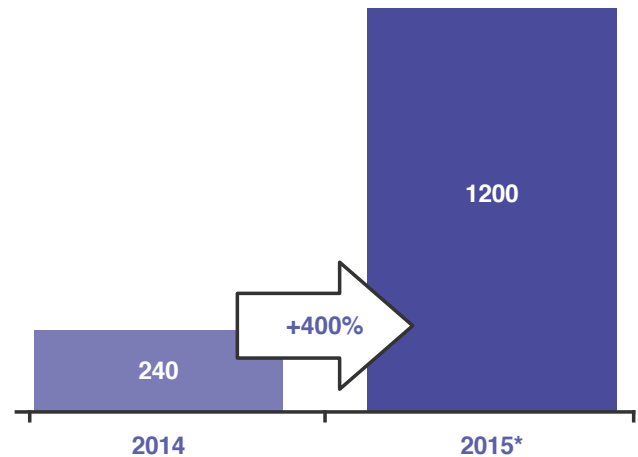
services for walk-in clientele and various feeding programs; from January to May 2015, the SHARE Center had served 2,022 people.¹³

Total Served by the SHARE Center



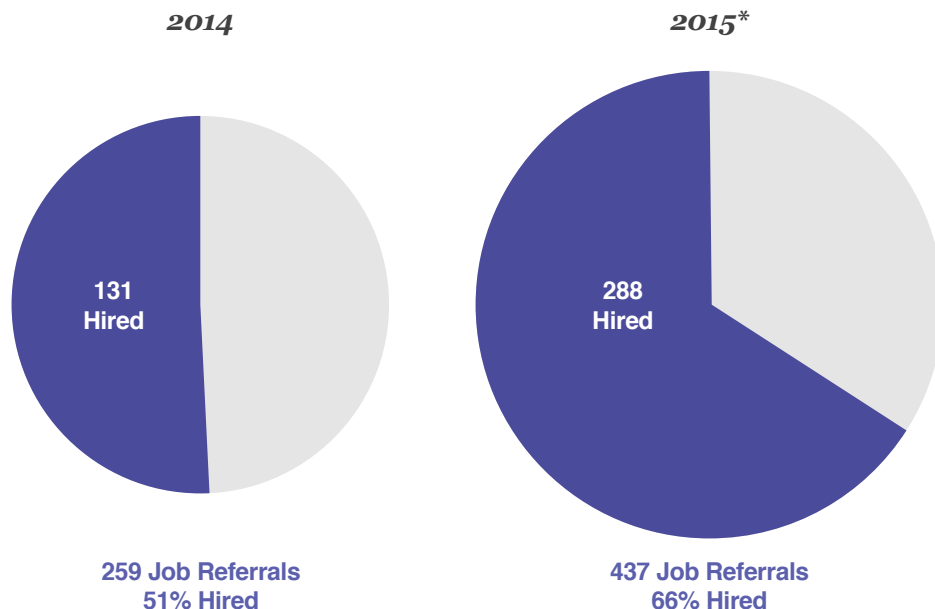
*Projected figure based on data from January to May 2015

Total Served by the SHARE Center's Free Lunch Program



*Projected figure based on data from January to May 2015

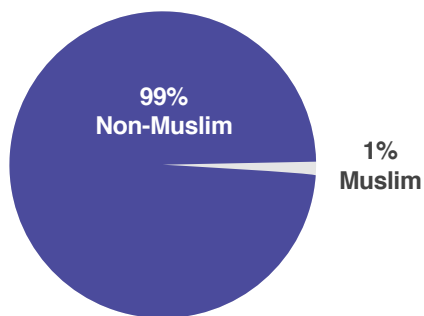
Between January and December 2014, 240 people received food through the free lunch program, whereas between just January and May 2015, that number had risen to 500. The annual job fair was attended by 145 jobseekers in 2014, and by 131 in 2015. In the same time period, the SHARE Center provided job referrals to 259 individuals in 2014, 131 of whom were hired. Between January and May 2015, job referrals were given to 182 individuals, 120 of whom were hired. Thus the rate of successful job referrals in 2014 stood at 50 percent, whereas for the first half of 2015, that figure rose to almost 66 percent.



*Projected figure based on data from January to May 2015

The majority of people served by SHARE are non-Muslims. Approximately 99 percent of the clientele are non-Muslim job seekers, and 1 percent are Muslim refugees from Iraq and Central Africa. Walk-in clients are mostly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and 40 percent are white. The exception to these general demographics is the annual job fair, which includes people from a wider spectrum, and often includes educated and skilled workers who happen to be out of work.

People Served



	2014	2015*	% Change
Total Served	3818	4853	+27
Free Lunch Program	240	1200	+400
Job Fair Attendance	145	131	-10
Job Referrals	259	437	+69
Hired from Referrals	131	288	+120
% Hired from Referrals	51%	66%	+15

*Projected figure based on data from January to May 2015

Organizational Structure and Funding

The SHARE Center is registered as a 501(c)(3) organization. At the initial planning stage, the SHARE Center had a Board, and all board members served as volunteers. Once the SHARE Center was formally launched in 2011, the Board was split into the Board of Trustees and the Executive Committee, and Saburah Dixon El-Amin was formally hired as the executive director. The Board of Trustees is responsible for fundraising and overseeing and setting the direction of the organization. It consists of older community members and professionals, many of whom are physicians. The Executive Committee consists of a chairperson, a general secretary, a treasurer, the executive director, and other volunteers involved with the day-to-day operations of the SHARE Center. This includes many younger professionals and students.

The SHARE Center is financed entirely by donations from the Muslim community. Since 2011, the SHARE Center has had an average annual budget of \$25,000 to \$30,000. The biggest fundraising vehicle has consistently been *Ramadan*.^f Every year, the SHARE Center hosts a fundraiser *iftar*^g at Masjid Bilal. In addition, fundraising letters are sent out to all past donors. Around 80 percent of the funds are generated through appeals made in mosques, not just in Lexington but also in surrounding areas. In 2015, after the SHARE Center announced plans to start a free health clinic, donations increased substantially. To raise money for the medical clinic, the SHARE Center also relied on crowd-sourcing through GoFundMe.com, which was a moderate success.

^f Ramadan: Month of fasting, when the Quran was first revealed.

^g Iftar: A meal eaten by Muslims breaking their fast after sunset during the month of Ramadan.

There is a clear organizational emphasis on transparency, and annual reports that provide details of SHARE Center activities and finances are distributed to donors and Muslim community members. The SHARE Center's current annual budget is \$35,000.

Other sources of funding are sparse. Dr. Bagby acknowledges that SHARE has been slow to apply for grants. A few applications were submitted in the past, with little success. However, in the process, the SHARE Center developed relations with the city administration and is being encouraged by city officials to continue submitting applications. While Dr. Bagby acknowledges this is an area in which SHARE needs to improve, he is also wary of depending entirely on government grants. Dr. Bagby wants to maintain the financial connection to the Muslim community as a consistent funding source. According to Dr. Bagby:

Many organizations like ours get big grants; the grant runs out, and pretty soon they're out of business because they have no other real source of income. So our plan is to maintain that pipeline to the Muslim community, and actually grow it. The community understands the benefit of this, [that] this is the best dawah that the Muslim community could be doing. Muslims realize that we're doing something that is not only a part of the mission of serving, but also putting a good face to Islam in our community. So, I don't think that money source would dry up.¹⁴

The focus on community service as a means of presenting Islam in a positive light appears to be paying off. The SHARE Center enjoys positive media attention: in the last 12 months, local TV news shows have aired three pieces about the SHARE Center, and nine articles have been published about it in the local newspaper. The mayor of Lexington has attended SHARE Center events twice, and the SHARE Center has built strong relationships with members of the city council.

Environment and Partnerships

At every level of its operations, it is clear that the SHARE Center's success is in no small part due to the relationships and partnerships it has successfully created in the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. From enhancing the quality of services it offers to increasing the number of clients it serves, partnerships have been key.

At every level of its operations, it is clear that the SHARE Center's success is in no small part due to the relationships and partnerships it has successfully created in the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. From enhancing the quality of services it offers to increasing the number of clients it serves, partnerships have been key.

Although Masjid Bilal served as the incubator for the SHARE Center concept, the mosque never entered into a formal partnership with the SHARE Center. Masjid Bilal does not put any of its members on

the SHARE Center Board of Trustees, nor does it exercise any oversight of its operations. But there is a deep relationship of support based on a shared vision. Masjid Bilal plays a key role as a platform for fundraising, as do other mosques in the area.

The Islamic Society of Central Kentucky (ISCK), the umbrella organization to which Masjid Bilal is a member, also provides human resources and monetary support. For instance, when the idea emanated to offer a weekly free lunch program, ISCK provided SHARE with access to the e-mail list of all its members and promoted the project in its *Juma'ah khutbahs*.^h As a result, within a week of the initial idea being proposed, the project was up and running.

On the operational side, SHARE relies on its partner programs for a steady stream of volunteer staff. Similarly, for the weekly free lunch program, the SHARE Center has established a relationship with a local donut shop and a restaurant chain to supply food items for boxed lunches, thereby reducing costs and building a stronger community network. For the planning and implementation stages of the free health clinic, SHARE Center volunteers formed a relationship with the Southland Christian Church's free health clinic and the Refuge Clinic. Staff at the Refuge Clinic proved extremely valuable in guiding the students through the administrative aspect of setting up a free clinic, from zoning and insurance matters to establishing correct procedures and policies. The clinic also has a partnership with the Lexington County Health Department, which has provided free flu shots and HIV testing.

For the success of employment services in particular, building relationships has been vital. Saburah Dixon El-Amin has a strong link with the mayor's office and other local businesses and employers. The relationships not only give the SHARE Center better access to information on new job openings and policies, but also add value to a job referral from the SHARE Center. At present, the number of successful job referrals is growing.

In addition, the SHARE Center has a relationship with the Black and Williams Neighborhood Community Center. (Saburah Dixon El-Amin is also a member of the community center's board.) The Black and Williams Center provides after-school programs for SHARE Center clients who have been successfully employed and who need child care.

To effectively provide services to those in need, the SHARE Center has had longstanding relationships with the halfway houses in its neighborhood. As a result, the client base for all services is consistently growing.

^h Juma'ah: Friday Noon Prayer; Khutbah: Sermon given during the Friday Noon Prayer.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Challenges

Despite its impressive successes in a relatively short period of time, the SHARE Center has faced or is facing challenges. As with all projects of this nature, although the idea was initially met with a great deal of enthusiasm from the community, once the tedium of the actual work commenced, enthusiasm waned and many people dropped out. The SHARE Center was able to effectively maneuver through the challenge because of its clarity of vision and determination by a handful of key team leaders. According to Dr. Bagby:

Vision is all important, because there were people who came on board in the beginning who lost interest or didn't see the great benefit of what we were doing. The vision of Saburah, myself, and a few other people have carried SHARE. And without that vision, that sense of priority, what we're supposed to be doing, I think we could have fallen apart earlier, as some of the initial energy waned and personality problems [arose]. Without that core of people who shared a vision, I don't know if we would have made it through those early years. Now that we have, our circle is expanding quite a bit, as more and more people become involved. So I think we've survived the early years, and now we're set to grow even more.¹⁵

Vision is all important.... And without that [collective] vision, that sense of priority, what we're supposed to be doing, I think we could have fallen apart earlier, as some of the initial energy waned.

In terms of ongoing challenges, two areas that top the list for Dr. Bagby are grant writing and networking. Although the SHARE Center is proud that it is funded entirely by donations from the Muslim community, there is recognition of the need to diversify sources of income. The SHARE Center has not had much success in its grant applications, and this is an area that needs improvement. Professional assistance from a grant writer is needed.

The SHARE Center has built some strong relationships with organizations in the community, but there is still room to improve its networking with governmental and community organizations. Dr. Bagby believes that the effect of the SHARE Center on the local community can be further improved by increasing and diversifying partnerships with other organizations. This requires an investment of time and effort, and Dr. Bagby hopes that the recent expansion of the SHARE Center team will facilitate better networking.

Lessons Learned From This Report

- 1. Have a clear mission and vision for the project, and ensure buy-in from the community by effectively communicating the vision.** The success of the SHARE Center is deeply rooted in the support from the Muslim community, which has continued to financially back the project through all stages of its evolution. The SHARE Center was initially supposed to provide services to only the Muslim community. And though the SHARE Center currently provides services to people of all faiths, with Muslims but a small percentage of the clientele, the Muslim community's support has remained constant.
- 2. Coalitions that bring together a diverse set of actors are an essential ingredient in starting and maintaining social service organizations.** For the SHARE Center, that partnership included African American Muslims and first-generation immigrant Muslims. In this case, African American Muslims bring their passion, vision, and expertise, while immigrant Muslims often provide financial and professional resources. In Lexington, that healthy coalition already existed within a mosque, Masjid Bilal, which was an incubator for the SHARE Center.
- 3. Assess community needs and interest, and take the program to a location where it is needed.** The SHARE Center began with a community meeting aimed at assessing community backing for the idea. This was followed by an internal debate on what services to provide and to whom to provide them. The services offered by the SHARE Center reflect the most urgent needs of its neighborhood. One of the major factors behind its success is the SHARE Center's close proximity to halfway houses in a low-income neighborhood. None of these factors was coincidental.
- 4. Actively recruit community members with a diverse and broad spectrum of needed expertise.** Once the SHARE Center decided to focus on community reentry programs, Dr. Bagby actively recruited Saburah Dixon El-Amin to the team, a Muslim who personally understood the needs of SHARE's target population. All members of the SHARE Board of Trustees agree that Saburah's involvement has been the single most important element behind SHARE's continued success.
- 5. Diversify clientele and income, but maintain Muslim ownership of the project.** The SHARE Center serves mostly non-Muslims, and the volunteer base includes people of all faiths. Yet the SHARE Center is seen as a Muslim organization because all its funding comes from donations from the Muslim community. While keen to tap into government funding, Dr. Bagby is also determined to maintain this identifying link to the Muslim community.
- 6. Empower community members to launch initiatives, and encourage the idea of community service as dawah.** The SHARE Center makes an effort to serve as a platform for community service ideas brought forward by community members. Programs such as the weekly free lunch and free clinic were initiated and executed by community members, with the SHARE Center providing space and some administrative support.
- 7. Hire at least one staff member.** For the SHARE Center, having Saburah Dixon El-Amin on board as a paid executive director has been instrumental in the SHARE Center's success. This has had a wide-ranging effect on operations, from ensuring the center is open at least four days a week to having a stronger community presence.

8.

Cultivate a strong financial base, and ensure transparency. The SHARE Center continues to flourish because it has the strong and reliable backing of affluent Muslims in the community. This is because the SHARE Center makes it a point to effectively communicate its mission and impact to its donors and the wider community on a regular basis. Donors and community members regularly receive an annual report that provides details of current SHARE programs; the number of people served; and details of the annual budget, income, and expenses. Transparency and regular communication ensure continued support.

9.

Build relationships and partnerships with other community organizations. Many of SHARE's most effective programs, such as the annual job fair, have been a success because of effective partnerships. The employment services, food programs, and health clinic all rely on effective partnerships for providing services and for ensuring good reach into the target populations.

Endnotes

1 <http://www.masjidbilalky.org/about-us-2/mission/>

2 Ibid.

3 <http://www.mana-net.org/subpage.php?ID=about>

4 Ibid.

5 Ihsan Bagby, telephone interview with Afif Rahman, Washington, DC, August 15, 2015.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 <http://www.kentucky.com/2012/05/27/2202800/merlene-davis-ex-offender-organizes.html>

9 Tahira Abdullah, telephone interview with Afif Rahman, Washington, DC, August 23, 2015.

10 SHARE Annual Report: January 2014 - May 2015.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Interview with Ihsan Bagby.

15 Ibid.

Notes

Notes



ISPU conducts objective, solution-seeking research that empowers American Muslims to further community development and fully contribute to democracy and pluralism in the United States. Since 2002, ISPU has been at the forefront of discovering trends and opportunities that impact the American Muslim community. Our research aims to educate the general public and enable community change agents, the media, and policymakers to make evidence-based decisions. In addition to building in-house capacity, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines, building a solid reputation as a trusted source for information for and about American Muslims.

For more information, please visit: www.ispu.org.

info@ispu.org | www.ispu.org | 1 (800) 920-ISPU (4778)

Washington, DC

1110 Vermont Ave. NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: (202) 768-8749

Michigan

6 Parklane Blvd, Suite 510
Dearborn, MI 48126
Tel: (313) 436-0523

© 2016 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding.