

Refugees get down to business as grant program doubles

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Dislodged from their native Bosnia by the horrors of war, Nedim and Jasmina Cepalo found food, shelter and jobs in Wisconsin.

But soon they wanted more: a business of their own.

With money from a state program that helps political refugees get settled, the couple opened a bakery in the Dodge County community of Mayville. Side by side, they work long days building a better life for themselves and their teenage son.

Now, the program that financed the Cepalos' entrepreneurial spirit is doubling in size, reaching out to new pockets of refugees from Somalia, Cuba, the former Soviet Union and, perhaps soon, Afghanistan.

In a remote corner of Barron

County, for example, more than 300 Somalian refugees have congregated.

Proponents of the refugee aid initiative say it benefits all Wisconsinites by keeping our most distressed immigrants out of that all-too-familiar American socioeconomic tract: poverty, welfare, crime.

For Nedim and Jasmina Cepalo, their little bakery has helped them recapture a sense of self-worth that they thought was lost long ago in the rubble of their former homeland. In a very real sense, it has allowed them to live the American dream.

"We think about our future here, to have our own business," Jasmina Cepalo, 46, recalled. "It was hard, but we got it now."

Program branching out

When it expands next year, the Refugee Microenterprise Development Program of the state Department of Workforce Development will become available in new areas of western Wisconsin, along the lakeshore and in the Milwaukee-to-Madison corridor.

26,779

Number of political refugees in Wisconsin in 1990.

61,168

The number in 2002.

Please see **REFUGEES, 8A**