

Aid to entrepreneurial refugees expanding

REFUGEES, From 1A

Officials are targeting a state-wide population of political refugees that has exploded from fewer than 30,000 in 1990 to more than 60,000 today, enough to rank among Wisconsin's largest cities.

In addition to a well-documented Hmong population from Laos, there are significant settlements from elsewhere in Southeast Asia, from Bosnia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia, from the former Soviet Union and from troubled areas of Africa.

One local agency active in the microenterprise program expects to soon welcome its first refugees from Afghanistan, where U.S.-led bombing missions recently overthrew a government suspected of supporting international terrorism.

"Certain people probably won't like it," Lao Xiong, director of refugee services for Fond du Lac-based ADVOCAP Inc., said of the possible influx of citizens from a country that many Americans hold responsible for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Laced with political and cultural overtones, the refugee aid program started about 10 years ago when federal money became available to boost business development within Wisconsin's growing refugee population.

Dozens of businesses have been launched over the years, and the vast majority of those grocery stores, hair salons, landscaping companies and other ventures are still operating.

Susan Levy, who administers the program in the Department of



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Jasmina Cepalo and her husband, Nedim, political refugees from Bosnia, make a variety of breads and other baked goods at Cepalo's Bakery in Mayville.

Workforce Development, said it insulates communities from disruptions that could be expected if large numbers of refugees arrived with no way to support themselves.

"They get shipped over here with very little resources other than their ability to work," Levy said.

A boost for entrepreneurs

The program also is credited with preserving the American tradition of fostering entrepreneurship among immigrants.

As Peter Linde of the Glenwood City-based West Central Community Action Agency put it, "The story is as old as the story of America."

The Department of Workforce Development distributes the federal grant money among a network of community action agencies — non-profit organizations created in Lyndon B. Johnson's war on poverty during the 1960s.

With funding next year increasing from \$266,000 to more than \$600,000, the program will expand

from three agencies based in Milwaukee, Fond du Lac and Independence to include four others, in Madison, Manitowoc, Westby and Glenwood City.

Greta Hanson, executive director of the Madison-based Community Action Coalition for South Central Wisconsin, said she is eager to tap what she called the "lost talent pool" of refugees in Dane, Jefferson and Waukesha counties.

Hanson's region includes thousands of people who fled here

from troubled homelands, including 300 Laotians living in Waukesha County and about 20 former Soviet Union citizens who settled in Jefferson County.

"Not everybody really is ready to start their own business," Hanson said. "But they'll be ready in a year or so."

In addition to financing, the microenterprise program helps refugees develop their business plans, learn American laws, establish good business practices and approach banks for long-term financing.

Unlike other immigrants, political refugees enjoy many of the benefits of U.S. citizenship immediately, making access to welfare and federal aid programs easier. And like any newcomer, they can petition for full citizenship after five years on American soil.

300 Somalians in Barron

In Barron County, more than 300 refugees from war-torn Somalia have made a new home in the tiny city of Barron, population 3,000.

Most were lured by the availability of jobs at the Jennie-O Turkey Store, a large meat-processing operation in Barron. But as word gets around that the state soon will be looking to jump-start new Somali businesses, an entrepreneurial impulse is taking hold.

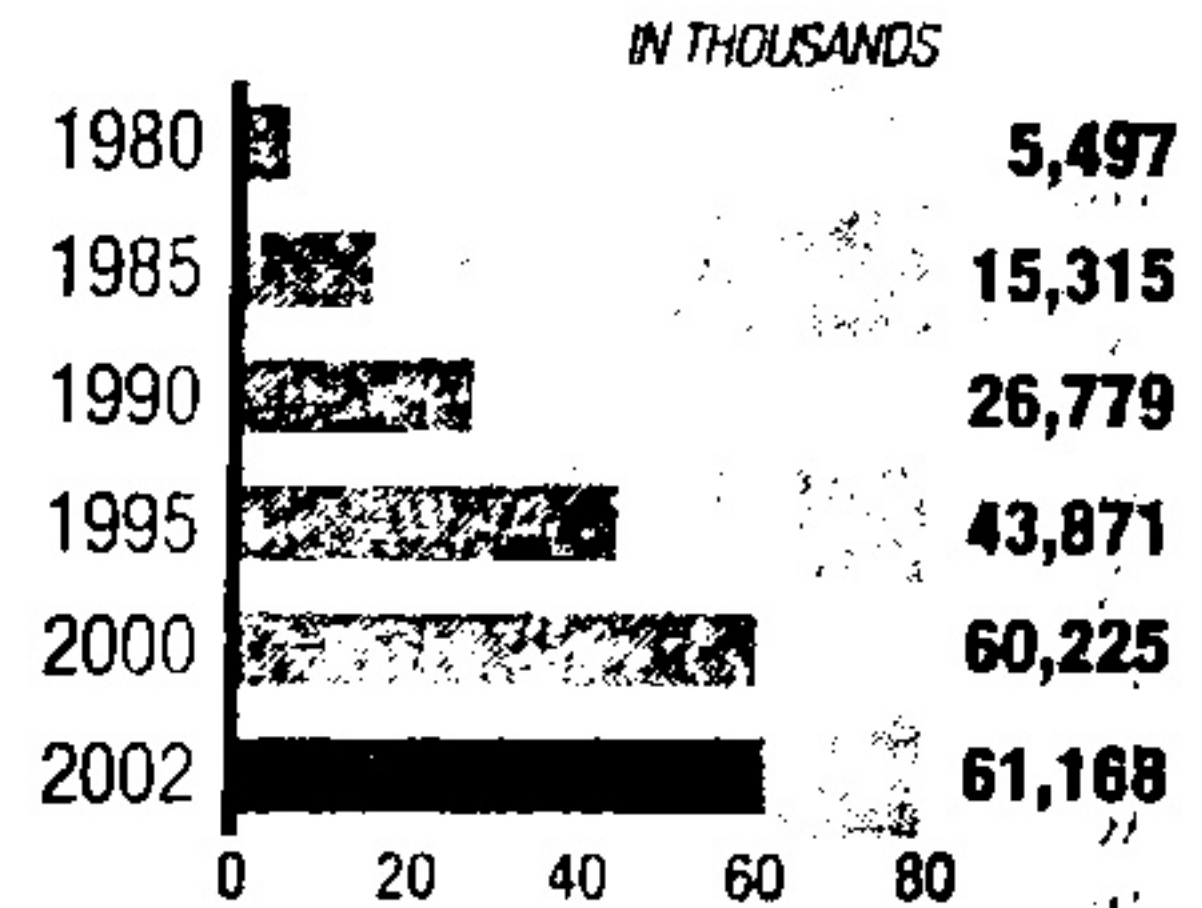
"A lot of people right now are thinking about organizing more businesses," said Mahado Qassim, who fled Somalia in 1993 with relatives.

Qassim said a restaurant or grocery store probably would succeed just by serving other Somali-

POLITICAL REFUGEES A GROWING PRESENCE

Wisconsin's political refugee population has more than doubled since 1990.

NUMBER OF POLITICAL REFUGEES IN WISCONSIN



A LOOK AT REFUGEE SETTLEMENT IN SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

COUNTY	TOTAL REFUGEES	LARGEST GROUP
Milwaukee	19,480	Hmong
Waukesha	522	Laos
Racine	296	Vietnam
Washington	176	Hmong
Kenosha	136	Yugoslavia
Ozaukee	60	Soviet Union
Walworth	51	Yugoslavia

Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development
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an refugees. Many in Barron routinely travel to nearby Minneapolis — home of another large Somali settlement — to find products of their homeland.

Qassim said she hopes, however, that all Wisconsinites learn to enjoy Somali culture and will patronize such a business.

"Everybody's trying to keep their culture," she said. "You're afraid, right? Both sides are that way."

But, she added, "there are Chinese restaurants everywhere."