

Somalis seek new ways to combat violence after killings

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Minnesota's Somali community leaders were soul searching at a community meeting on Monday evening, following last week's killings of a man and woman of Somali descent.

Dahir Ahmed Abdirahman, 29, and Tahany Abdi Omar Erbob, 24, were found shot to death in a car in the Longfellow neighborhood of Minneapolis on Friday night. Reached before the meeting, a spokesperson for the Minneapolis Police Department said the killings are under investigation.

Abdirizak Bihi, director of the Somali Education and Social Advocacy Center, helped convene Monday's meeting on short notice at the Brian Coyle Community Center in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis. He said the meeting is a way to launch a more productive discussion about violence against people of Somali descent in Minnesota.

"We need to change the way we approach this victimization of our young people in our community," Bihi said. "Every time things happen we are mad at police, then we just go away. But one thing that's not going away is the brutality of the crime."

Einashe Ali, 25, helped start Somali Youth Against Violence in January. He said young people are frustrated that law enforcement often doesn't seem to make much progress into investigations that involve the deaths of Somali-Americans.

Ali said the group is urging people stand against violence, and to tell police what they know when something happens, even if it's by calling an anonymous tip line.

"Our main goal is just to go places, tell people this is happening," Ali said. "It's happening in your neighborhood, it's happening in my neighborhood, unless we do something right now it will spread very bad."

People at the meeting kicked around ideas ranging from offering a reward for information leading to the arrest of a suspect in the killings to directing more money to youth employment programs. At the end, they scheduled another meeting to flesh out details of a youth anti-violence plan. Organizers plan to hold other community meetings in cities across the state with large Somali-American populations.

Those in attendance at Monday's meeting included representatives from Minneapolis City Council Member Abdi Warsame and Mayor Betsy Hodges' offices, anti-violence activists from north Minneapolis and former Ramsey County Sheriff Bob Fletcher, who began educating law enforcement officials about Somali culture following his election loss in 2010.

One group that wasn't represented was the Minneapolis Police Department. In a meeting where many attendees lamented the lack of progress on investigations involving the killings of Somali-Americans, and where even Fletcher criticized the MPD for their lack of outreach to the Somali community, that absence was glaring.

Hassan Ali of Minneapolis said he expects police to at show up to demonstrate that they care about violence against community members. "Since this recent killing was two days ago, I was expecting the police to be here," Ali said. "If I don't see them now, how are they going to do their work, a week from now, a month from now, a year from now?"