

# Building a Resilient Community to Counter Violent Extremism

Houston/Harris County

Facilitated by Mustafa Tameez & Wardah Khalid



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Mustafa Tameez and Wardah Khalid, from June to December 2014, facilitated focus groups, summarized input, and wrote recommended statements.

## BACKGROUND

Violent extremism, particularly of the homegrown, lone wolf terrorist (LWT) variety, is an increasing threat in the United States and a rising concern for law enforcement and communities of all backgrounds. Many of the attacks in recent years were carried out by individuals new to or unfamiliar with Islam or individuals lured by radical ideologies.

These attacks are perpetrated by individuals both abroad and here in the U.S. In 2014, officials detained at least 15 U.S. citizens, a majority of them were Muslims in their teens or early 20s.<sup>1</sup> Countering radicalization and violent extremism requires a thoughtful approach that considers the problem from multiple perspectives, and takes into account the needs of the greater community as well as law enforcement.

## Community Plan

Mustafa Tameez and Wardah Khalid from Outreach Strategists, were tasked by the Harris County Sheriff's Office to play the role of conveners to put together a document that could be shared with and crystalized by the larger community. What follows is a multi-part, comprehensive plan with recommendations that aim to build a resilient community by assessing and strengthening existing and new community programs. It also includes an incident response plan that can serve as a useful resource for immediately dealing with specific issues or threats.

In formulating our strategy, we consulted social and mental health professionals, community leaders, law enforcement, and academic research to ensure that the problem was tackled from all angles. We focused on leveraging existing community programs, rather than creating entirely new initiatives, as a practical approach to accomplishing the recommendations offered. Finally, careful consideration was given to the role of law enforcement in order to ensure that the civil liberties and human rights of community members were protected along with their security.

Our hope is that the community plan can be implemented in Houston/Harris County to make the region safer for people of all backgrounds as well as serve as a model for other major U.S. regions to build resiliency and combat violent extremism in their own communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, Kevin. "Three American teens, recruited online, are caught trying to join the Islamic State." *The Washington Post*. 8 Dec. 2014. Web. 10 Dec. 2014.

### *Community Consultants*

The following is a list of individuals that were interviewed during the development of this community plan. In addition, Sheriff Adrian Garcia facilitated a town hall meeting of about 50 diverse community leaders from across Houston/Harris County to share the details of this document. Attendees validated the assessment and recommendations and provided additional suggestions that were incorporated in the community plan.

NAME	ORGANIZATION AND POSITION
<b>Aijaz Ahmed</b>	Salaam House Re-Entry, Muslim Outreach and Reentry Program (MORE)
<b>Abdur Rehman Badat</b>	Training & Community Education Program Coordinator, Crisis Intervention Center
<b>Sh. Waleed Basyouni</b>	Imam, Clear Lake Islamic Center
<b>Idris Bello</b>	Masjid Mumineen and Nigerian community Representative
<b>Joe Bradford</b>	Financial advisor and community speaker
<b>Dr. Moein Butt</b>	Shifa Clinic Representative
<b>Afaq J. (AJ) Durrani</b>	General Secretary of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston (ISGH)
<b>Hesham Ebaid</b>	Head of Executive Committee, Muslim American Society (MAS) Katy Center
<b>Shariq Ghani</b>	Founder, Fajr Program
<b>Hasan Gopalani</b>	Instructor, Fajr Program
<b>Sadia Jalali</b>	Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist
<b>Dr. Mazhar Kazi</b>	ISGH New Muslim class, FreeQuran.com
<b>Obaid Kazi</b>	Associate Director, ISGH Main Center and Khutbah Committee Chair
<b>Ghulam Kehar</b>	Amanaah Refugee Services
<b>Dr. Laeeq Khan</b>	Director of ISGH Prison Dawah Program
<b>Abdullah Oduro</b>	Founder of KnewU
<b>Isa Parada</b>	Youth and Marriage Counselor, Masjid as-Sabireen
<b>Zeyn Patel</b>	Risala Foundation
<b>Yemeen Rahman</b>	iLEAP, Masjid as Sabireen
<b>Khalis Rashaad</b>	Imam, Ibrahim Islamic Center
<b>Zuhaira Razzack</b>	Principal, ILM Academy
<b>Zuhair Sha'ath</b>	Youth Director, Clear Lake Islamic Center
<b>Ahmed Shaheed</b>	Assistant Imam, Masjid Warithuddeen Mohammed
<b>Farrukh Shamsi, MBA</b>	President/CEO of Texas Clinic Healthcare System
<b>Sarah Sultan</b>	Licensed Mental Health Counselor

Research shows that LWTs come from a variety of backgrounds, hold a myriad of ideologies, and appear to have different motivations. For the purposes of this community plan, we define a LWT as **a person who performs politically inspired terrorist attacks without direct orders from an organization or network and with minimal assistance from others.**

Because they operate in isolation, LWTs have a critical advantage in that they more easily avoid identification and detection, creating a serious problem for law enforcement.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are some individual characteristics that LWTs share that can aid communities and law enforcement in identifying at-risk individuals before they reach the point of planning or carrying out a terrorist attack.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Characteristics of Lone Wolf Terrorists**

**Difficulties in school or career progression** – Many LWTs had dropped out of school, were unemployed, or were having financial or career difficulties.

**Sense of rejection** – Individuals who were alienated from their peers or abused by one or both parents during childhood can be particularly angry and vulnerable.

**Projections of personal beliefs on an ideology** – Some LWTs with personal or financial issues, or social and political grievances, find solace in extremist ideologies. However, their actual understanding of the context of Quranic passages mentioning violence is quite shallow.

**Criminal background or abusive behavior** – Several of these individuals have a record of criminal activity, abusive behavior, excessive drug/alcohol use, or are absorbed by radical or violent agendas.

**Mental Illness** – Research has found a significant link between mental problems and LWT. In a study of 98 lone wolf attackers in the U.S., 40 percent had identifiable mental health problems, compared with 1.5 percent in the general population.<sup>4</sup>

Terrorist organizations can exploit these factors and recruit or influence individuals through promises of stability, purpose, and a sense of belonging. In addition, they often manipulate an ideology, such as religion, to justify violent attacks on society. Of course, while each of these factors in isolation does not necessarily signify a terrorist threat, they should be taken seriously, especially when multiple factors are present in one person. At the very least, they present opportunities for the community to strengthen and improve its resiliency.

#### **Houston/Harris County Specific Challenges**

The challenge for Houston/ Harris County, the most diverse city in the nation and third largest urban county in the U.S., is how to articulate and implement security policies that value and respect minority groups and simultaneously keep the city and its people safe. Houston/Harris County is fortunate in that it has not suffered a violent extremist attack thus far. This may be due in part to the region's unique diversity and representative leaders from various communities, but this does not mean the area is immune nor should it be unprepared in the event of a serious incident.

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Weimann. "Lone Wolves in Cyberspace." *Journal of Terrorism Research*.

*Volume 3 Number 2* (September 22, 2012). <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/article/view/405/431>.

<sup>3</sup> Khalid, Covalenco-Tietz, El Waylly, Hauser. Unpublished Manuscript, Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, New York, N.Y.

"Combatting Lone Wolf Terrorism" (Spring 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Lawless, Jill. "Can identifying mental illness stop terror attacks?" *Associated Press*. 15 Dec. 2014. Web. 23 Dec. 2014.



The Harris County Sheriff's Office has convened several roundtables in conjunction with community leaders and Muslim youth regarding the pressing issue of violent extremism. At these events, participants expressed concern regarding the increasing isolation and disenfranchisement of Muslim youth and the lack of trust between law enforcement and the community. They also showed a genuine mistrust of the media and disappointment with the media's portrayal of Muslims. In addition, the youth acknowledged that there were anger issues in the community regarding the negative treatment of Muslims in the U.S. and abroad. They also stated that people lack appropriate outlets to express their frustrations.

The youth forum participants stressed that better engagement for distressed individuals before an incident takes place is imperative in order to combat this problem. They also expressed a desire for more interfaith and community work and education, especially for the younger demographic, to assist in easing tensions and building positive relationships between various communities.

### ***Issues with Existing Federal Programs***

The aforementioned distrust between authorities and community members has been fueled in recent years by federal law enforcement and intelligence programs that have targeted mosques and Muslim community organizations for intelligence gathering under the guise of community outreach.

Community leaders believe that law abiding Muslims have been pressured into becoming informants and that religious observance has been considered a potential indicator for violent behavior by the authorities. Muslim students at many universities in the Northeast believe that they have been monitored merely for participating in activities coordinated by their campus Muslim Students Association. Business owners, customers, and mosque attendees throughout the nation believe that they are in a similar situation, suspect for simply carrying out their daily activities.<sup>5</sup>

These perceptions contribute not to a safer community, but instead raise real barriers between the Muslim community and law enforcement. Breaking down these barriers is essential to community safety. At the more local level there are ample opportunities to bridge the gaps between law enforcement and the community and enhance ongoing efforts to maintain safety.

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<sup>5</sup> American Civil Liberties Union. "ACLU Urges Civil Liberties Agenda at White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism" (September 24, 2014). <https://www.aclu.org/national-security/aclu-urges-civil-liberties-agenda-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism>.

## **Building a Resilient Community – Assessment & Recommendations**

### **Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Personal/Family Issues**

**Challenge:** Young people struggling with mental health issues, drug or alcohol abuse, and personal or family issues are particularly vulnerable to falling prey to violent extremism because of their psychological state. In some situations mental health problems are the reason an individual takes extreme measures to remedy their situation or to lash out against society.

In addition the Muslim community has seen an increase in disaffected second generation youth who are detached from their family and harbor extreme apathy and hopelessness. They are often the children of upper middle class or wealthy parents who immigrated to the United States and focused on education and establishing themselves. Their children are lacking this sense of purpose and sometimes feel that they cannot change things. These individuals are at risk for being attracted by terrorist groups or their missions because they provide them purpose and a perceived opportunity to create change on behalf of Islam and Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

Health services to address mental health issues are sorely lacking in the Muslim American community, partially due to a lack of Muslim mental health professionals and also as a result of the major stigma attached with seeking help for emotional crises.

**Opportunity:** We must remove the stigma associated with mental health services in the community. Knowledge is power and we believe that offering more educational events in the community regarding mental health, particularly in the mosques, can help to eliminate some of this stigma and assist people in understanding and coping with these often misunderstood or ignored issues. Providing free and low cost counseling services at local mosques and clinics can encourage members to take advantage of these services, including individual, family, and group therapy. In addition, community leaders, such as Imams, should also obtain a basic counseling certificate to increase their effectiveness in the community.

**Workshops for parents** to better understand the issues their children face, help them become familiar with the mental health warning signs, and strengthen family bonds between generations, are another must. Parents should not just be vigilant *about* their children, but be connected to them so that they are aware of their activities and the lines of communication are open.

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<sup>6</sup> Sadia Jalali. In person interview by Wardah Khalid. November 2, 2014.

The following are examples of existing local health services that can be leveraged to bolster mental health services in the Muslim American community in Houston/Harris County.

**Houston Shifa Clinic** – With locations in several mosques around Houston/Harris County, the clinic is a prime opportunity to facilitate these services. Currently, the Shifa Clinic provides general medicine and specialized medical services on a weekly and monthly basis, respectively. While the specialized services do include a psychiatrist, we recommend that the clinic increase the frequency of psychiatric care as well as add additional professionals such as psychologists, social workers, and substance abuse and addiction specialists into the regular rotation. This could be done on a volunteer basis (i.e. 5 hours/week per professional).

**Mental Health First Aid** – Mental Health First Aid is an 8-hour course that gives people the skills to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The evidence behind the program demonstrates that it does build mental health literacy by helping the public identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness.<sup>7</sup> We recommend that every mosque and community organization send at least one or two individuals to receive the training so that they are prepared to assist their local constituents, should the need arise.

–Abdur Rehman Badat, Program Coordinator of Training and Community Education at **Crisis Intervention Center**, is a course instructor and offers trainings to community members.

In addition, there are counseling services offered at every school, or at the very least, in every school district. These services are free and should be taken

advantage of by students when they are dealing with a troubling situation. Community organizations should publicize this and encourage students to seek help from their school services.

*Note: These recommendations do not apply to individuals suffering from serious psychiatric disorders, as their issues should be treated with professional medical care.*

### **Muslim Youth, Interfaith, and Education Programs**

**Challenge:** Many violent extremists are young loners who have either voluntarily kept away from the community at large or were shunned by members after expressing radical views. They sometimes feel unable to connect to their peers and become more isolated (and perhaps extremist) in their beliefs. These individuals often have difficulties in school or career progression, experience a sense of rejection from family or society, and have identity issues (either searching for an identity or facing challenges due to conflicts within their identity).<sup>8</sup>

Special attention should be paid to bullying as there actually have been instances in Houston/Harris County where bullied youth were at risk for violent behavior shortly after 9/11. These particular individuals were attempting to organize into a violent gang before they were stopped by a community leader. It was later discovered that they were responding to being bullied by their peers for being Muslim.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> National Registry of Evidence Based Program and Practices. "Intervention Summary – Mental Health First Aid." 28 Jan. 2014. Web. 23 Dec. 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Khalid, Covalenco-Tietz, El Waylly, Hauser. Unpublished Manuscript, Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, New York, N.Y.

<sup>9</sup> Isa Parada. Phone interview by Wardah Khalid. November 6, 2014.

**Opportunity:** 1) Dialogue promotion programs and  
2) Identity, interfaith, and education programs

**Dialogue-promotion programs**, such as youth *halaqas* (group religious discussion and lecture), are needed to encourage inclusive, free flowing conversations, clarify religious texts, and acknowledge youth grievances in safe spaces. These structured conversations can be held in local mosques or community centers and led by mentors, religious teachers, psychologists, counselors, and professionals trained in dealing with identity issues and identifying risk factors of extremist behavior.

An **open dialogue highlighting religious texts** could be an effective means to eliminate the attraction of terrorist groups by addressing them directly and debunking their claims, rather than merely telling youth they should just stay away from such organizations and their philosophies.

It also provides a half-way point for community members worried about radical youth by not immediately banishing them from the mosque but instead engaging them to have a better understanding of the core principles of Islam. We envision the program either being an extension of existing mosque or community center initiatives or a separate group that meets at selected locations around Houston/Harris County on a regular (perhaps bi-monthly) basis.

**Islamic Schools**, both full time and weekend, provide additional opportunities for learning and discussion. Weekend schools in particular have a larger number of youth that can be engaged in weekly dialogues about identity and religious teachings that go beyond basic Islamic knowledge and Quran instruction. This will hopefully make them better prepared to handle issues they might face outside the safe walls of the Islamic school.

No matter where they are held, there must be an environment of trust during these discussions to ensure they are effective. Youth must have confidence in the mentors leading them as well as any community members or professionals attending. There should be an understanding that anything said does not leave the room. Keeping discussions small may be a way to help facilitate this environment. Finally, program success should not be judged by quantity, but by quality.

The following programs are examples of existing successful discussion models in Houston/Harris County. They have all been able to have an impact, even though they vary in size and scope.

- 1. Fajr Program** – An invitation-only leadership and Islamic studies program that teaches basic Islamic skills, activism, community involvement, and team-building. The program spans four semesters and seeks committed students who want to give back to the community. Their closed environment and small classes enable the group to have sensitive conversations in an intellectual and safe space.
- 2. Ibrahim Islamic Center** – A relatively new mosque associated with Imam W. Deen Mohammed. Its main focuses are social justice, economic and financial development/entrepreneurship, and interfaith work. Imam Khalis Rashaad considers the mosque a safe space, as there are often discussions on different issues where members can openly share their experiences. The small community helps create a sense of trust among attendees, making the conversations more meaningful and productive.



### **3. Islamic Leadership Excellence Achievement**

**Program (iLEAP)** – A program at Masjid as-Sabireen for graduates of their weekend school. With about 30 current students, it keeps youth engaged at the community center until they reach high school age and can become volunteers. iLEAP is taught by mentors (paid a small stipend) who lead discussions on current events topics, explain and discuss verses from the Quran, and organize field trips and interactive games for the youth to participate in each week.

**Identity, interfaith, and education programs** are also necessary to help youth build a strong Muslim American identity, gain exposure to and build bridges with members of other cultures and faiths, mediate social tensions such as bullying and racism, increase tolerance and understanding between the faiths, and clear misconceptions about Islamic teachings that are frequently cited by Islamophobes and violent extremists. These programs should include diverse faith leaders, teachers, volunteers, and a standard curriculum focused on breaking down the idea of “the other” that often contributes to fear and distrust between different ethnic, religious, and social groups.

Muslim youth should understand how to answer questions about Islam to their non-Muslim peers, in an effort to prevent misperceptions. **Masjid Hamza** recently coordinated a program which trained youth on answering frequently asked questions and mistaken beliefs on the faith. Similar programs could be offered by more mosques around Houston/Harris County.

**The Islamic Networks Group**, a speakers bureau based out of California, has a document which answers “100 Frequently Asked Questions” about Islam that would be useful in this.<sup>10</sup> They also counter prejudice and discrimination against Muslim Americans by teaching about Muslim traditions and contributions in the context of America’s history and cultural diversity, while building relations between Muslim Americans and other groups.

We envision a similar group of speakers that can talk to schools and community centers about Islam and debunk fallacies about the faith and address violent extremism. Counter-narrative programming, such as by victims of violent extremism, could also be effective in dissuading potential violent behavior. Houston/Harris County has a large population of refugees, some of whom fled from extremist violence, and their stories are important to building a counter-extremist narrative.

The following are some Houston-based organizations that currently engage Muslim youth in identity, interfaith, and educational programs:

**Clear Lake Islamic Center** – Has several youth programs under the New Era Youth Association (NEYA) that aim to meet their religious and social needs. These include an Advanced Youth Discussion Group, Saturday Islamic School, and Friday Night Lights Youth Halaqa. Each program focuses on mentorship so that youth have role models to look up to and reach out to with their concerns.

**ISGH Youth Coordinator** – ISGH has a growing youth program headed by Isa Parada. This is an important opportunity that should continue to be developed and supported by the community at large.

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<sup>10</sup> Answers to 100 Frequently Asked Questions about Muslims.” Islamic Networks Group. Web. 4 Nov. 2014.  
<http://www.ing.org/answers-to-100-frequently-asked-questions>.

**Masjid Warithuddeen Mohammed** – Has a youth program and a camp, Camp Khalil, that focuses on mentorship, self-empowerment, and teaches young people to be proud of who they are. They offer boys-only and girls-only programs and emphasize that hard work and a good character are most important.

**Muslim American Society (MAS) Katy Center** – Has a dedicated full time youth director and serves the youth through monthly service projects, interfaith events, sports activities, and regular retreats. They offer programs on bullying, drugs, and encourage parents to get involved during discussions. Their executive board committee includes individuals from age twenty and up.

**Risala Foundation** – A speaker's bureau that aims to build community and increase understanding of Islam by reaching out to respected Islamic teachers across the Muslim world. It coordinates with mosques across Houston and has offered family retreats as well as programs on spirituality, activism, and community engagement that attract many young professionals. They periodically partner with other organizations such as Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), MAS, etc. for programs and conventions as well.

### **Leadership and Civic Engagement**

**Challenge:** Foreign policy, particularly towards the Muslim world, as well as the plight of Muslims in Muslim countries, is manipulated as a grievance for violent extremists. Young people struggling with their Muslim American identity can be vulnerable to these arguments in their desire to improve the life of Muslims around the world.

**Opportunity:** The Muslim community can decrease the lure of extremist calls by offering alternatives for youth to get involved in local, national, and international politics, community and mentorship organizations, educational and professional groups, and advocacy work. These activities will give youth

an opportunity to make a very real impact on their community in a safe, productive, manner and simultaneously provide them with a **sense of purpose** and a cause they can believe in. Youth are passionate about changing the world. The local community can provide them with the leadership and conflict-management skills to do so.

To accomplish this, we suggest partnering with local groups like **EMERGE-TEXAS, Muslim Professional Association (MPA), Muslim Urban Professionals (MUPPIES)**, etc. to launch **civic engagement initiatives** to make these opportunities more familiar and accessible to the Houston/Harris County Muslim community. For instance, informational sessions, site visits, and introductions by Muslims currently involved in these organizations can assist in the concerted effort to invite others to engage in this work.

Islam emphasizes charity and serving the underprivileged, and youth should be encouraged to uphold this value by engaging in **local service projects** to give back to the less fortunate. Existing community organizations should strive to include a service element in their programming such as volunteering at soup kitchens, food banks, citywide Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, and at local schools. They should also partner with secular organizations as well as other faith groups to build bridges and promote Islam in a positive light in the greater Houston area.

This will help youth build a **strong Muslim identity, integrate** them into society, alleviate feelings of isolation, and teach them that they can make the change they desire, but they must do it through the **proper channels**. The Muslim American community is rich with diversity and has an established history in the U.S. and this should be apparent in our institutions, whether on the local community level or in state or federal government.

The following is an example of a program that offers strong civic engagement opportunities. This program, and others, must be expanded to develop a civic engagement ecosystem within the Houston/Harris County Muslim American community.

**Emerging Leaders Program** – Offered by EMERGE-TEXAS, this leadership training program is for college students and young professionals from underrepresented communities. Participants take part in three retreats to learn about leadership, engagement, the political process, and service.

### **New Muslim Converts**

**Challenge:** The number of converts across the nation jumped after 9/11. They and “born again” Muslims are at risk for being influenced by radicals because of their vulnerable state, as they can find themselves ostracized by family and friends who do not identify with their new religion or religiosity. In some isolated cases (both in Europe and the United States), converts experiencing the heightened religiosity that often follows conversions have been steered in the wrong direction by extremists who claim to “understand them” and encourage radicalism. There have also been isolated cases of self-radicalization by misunderstanding religious texts. Both can cause a response that stems from a wrongly interpreted understanding of Islam.

**Opportunity:** It is critical that these new Muslims have a good support system to guide them in reaching a proper understanding of Islam. Knowledge and patience should be emphasized and they should be offered structured educational and social programs to ease their integration into the Muslim community. They should also be warned about being influenced by radicals calling them to commit violent acts in the name of Islam. More **volunteers and funding** to assist with already established programs are critical in this regard.

Houston/Harris County has several support programs in place for new Muslims that will require community support to further their work as the convert population continues to grow.

### **General Programs**

**Andalucia Center** – Founded by Mujahid Fletcher, who immigrated to the U.S. at age 8, the Center focuses on Latino and Muslim community youth and the utilization of technology to promote integration and counter violent extremism. A former gang member, Fletcher utilizes his compelling story, insight on the culture of individualism that is unique to America, and his interpretation of community engagement which includes a spiritual component, to rehabilitate troubled community members.

**ISGH Islam 101 Class** – Weekly classes taught by Dr. Mazhar Kazi that focuses on community-building, basic moral values, and how to build a peaceful life. It does not preach or teach rituals and emphasizes the similarities between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

**KnewU** – An initiative geared towards assisting new Muslims and born again Muslims to grow in their faith organically via social and educational programs; to understand the basic concepts of Islam and how to put them into practice. KnewU emphasizes continuing Islamic education, guidance, and mentorship after conversion through 8 week and 2-3 day seminars, potlucks, etc. .

**New Muslim Guide Study Group** – Meets every Sunday morning at the Clear Lake Islamic Center and discusses their “New Muslim Guide” book, which covers the basics of Islam and how to practice the faith.

**New Muslim Orientation** – An ongoing program that conveys basic teachings of Imam W. Deen Mohammed and communicates scriptural interpretation in a Muslim-American context to converts (mostly from prison or college). It provides students with Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation of the Quran and encourages converts to ask questions.

***Prison Based Dawah (religious outreach) and Reentry Programs:***

Since some converts become Muslim in prison, a Muslim presence in this area is crucial to promoting a **proper understanding** of Islam among inmate converts. Specifically, prison dawah volunteers should go through **periodic educational sessions** themselves to ensure they are emphasizing a correct understanding of the Quran and Hadith (Prophetic tradition) to the inmates.

**ISGH Prison Dawah Program** – Started in 1993, the ISGH Prison Dawah program sends volunteers and full time Muslim chaplains to 50–60 prisons a month. Inmates receive a copy of the Quran, books on Islamic basics and the Messengers, and Quranic Arabic language instruction materials. All volunteers must apply and attend a three hour orientation before they are granted access to the prisons. Each prison has about 150 Muslims, and of those, 80–85% are converts. The dawah program focuses on teaching Islamic principles such as patience, compassion, and prayer. Over 2,000 individuals have converted to Islam since the program's inception.<sup>11</sup>

**Materials utilized include:**

- Holy Quran (Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation and color coded tajweed [proper pronunciation rules])
- “Islam, Beliefs and Teachings”  
by Ghulam Sarwar
- “Dictionary of the Holy Quran”  
by Abdul Mannan Omar
- DVDs such as “The Message”
- PowerPoints on the depiction of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in classic literature

Research shows that **80%** of offenders will be rearrested for a similar offense after their release from Harris County jails. However, this number drops to **12%** when inmates participate in support services before returning to society.<sup>12</sup> The Houston/Harris County Muslim community currently has a few reentry programs that serve as a base for accomplishing this goal:

**Freemen of the City** – A monthly program at Masjid Warithuddeen Mohammed that assists released prisoners who converted to the faith while in prison with integrating back into the community. Supported by several Muslim chaplains, the initiative helps them find employment, housing, etc. and incorporates them into mosque activities.

**Muslim Outreach and Re-Entry Program (MORE)** – Nonprofit organization focused on reentry needs of Muslim citizens reintegrating after incarceration, founded by Aijaz Ahmed in July 2014 and includes Badar Alam and Imam Ali Kemal as directors. It was funded by a grant from the Houston Donor Group. MORE uses LSCMI – a risk assessment and case management tool – to select its clients and the American Parole and Probation Association's approved Cognitive Behavior Change Curricula to reduce recidivism rates.

**Muslim Mentorship Program** – One of five reentry programs under the Harris County Sheriff's Office Reentry Program. Imam Ali Kemal Civelek and Aijaz Ahmed are the only two approved reentry volunteers who visit the county jail each Friday to offer their services. The program is in its infancy and is actively seeking volunteers or sponsors to hire the services of reentry coaches to assist 100 inmates at the Harris County Jail.

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<sup>11</sup> Laeeq Khan. Phone interview by Wardah Khalid. November 6, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> “Jail Chaplaincy and Reentry Services.” Harris County Sheriff's Office. Web. 10 Nov. 2014.  
[http://www.harriscountyso.org/chaplain\\_services.aspx](http://www.harriscountyso.org/chaplain_services.aspx)

**Salaam House** – A Texas Department of Criminal Justice approved transitional housing facility that was sponsored by Citadel Foundation Inc., a non-profit founded by the Houston Turkish American community. It facilitated rehabilitation by providing a place to live in tranquility, improving ex-inmates' sense of belonging and self-esteem by offering a compassionate environment, and assisting in finding work. Of the 22 ex-offenders that went through the program, only 2 returned to prison.

Programs to assist former convicts re-integrate into society are fairly successful, but they may not be as well established as other community programs and require greater support to grow. The community should support these initiatives by inviting them to the mosques to speak about their efforts. It can also take lessons from Christian faith based prison and reentry programs steered by churches as a successful model, such as St. John's Reentry, which MORE currently works with.

## **Religious and Community Leaders**

**Challenge:** Muslim youth and their parents often look to religious and community leaders for guidance to walk them through challenges they face, including the issue of violent extremism. However, there are often not enough resources devoted to youth or parent/child relationship issues at mosques and community centers.

**Opportunity:** Mosques and community centers must play a more active role in assisting community members with family issues and controversial topics such as jihad, foreign policy, terrorism, etc. Religious leaders, in particular, have a **duty to be knowledgeable** on these issues so that they can better answer questions their congregants bring forward.

These issues can also be covered, in addition to other topics, during the Jummah khutbah (Friday sermon). Khutbahs (sermons) should be inspiring and deal with tough issues in a positive light. There is ample opportunity to construct khutbah's that deal with the challenges and realities of modern day life.

If a khutbah is being preached against radicalization, then members of the community who spread wrong or radical ideas about Islam and society should be condemned by name publicly. This is the best way to forthrightly alert the community about individuals who may pose a threat or espouse a dangerous narrative.

Khateeb (those giving the khutbah) should have **mentorship programs** where they can be guided by more experienced khateeb tackling these issues in a constructive manner.



**Full time youth directors** are a must at every single mosque in Houston/Harris County to create youth-specific programming and serve as a well-educated resource for young people to open up to about their questions and concerns. They should also be trustworthy and active in the community and able to identify any problems or changes with youth who regularly attend the mosque. Teens need a place to go and people to talk to, and a mosque youth director can help facilitate that welcoming environment.

**Parents play the most effective role in countering violent extremism** and should also be active participants in the mosque. They should be invited to programs that cover issues affecting both them and their children, such as drugs, relationships, radical religious views, and other “taboo” topics. The intention is to deal with these sensitive topics directly and open up the channels of communication for both parties to understand things from a proper Islamic context as well as better understand each other’s perspectives.

Other programs that encompass the entire community should also be promoted. Dinners, service projects, informational and religious talks for all ages that involve professionals, religious leaders, and law enforcement should be held on a regular basis. These initiatives encourage people to know one another, strengthen existing friendships, and build a sense of community that welcomes new and existing members as they walk in the door. This **strong community support provides a sense of belonging** and prevents the aforementioned feelings of isolation, desperation, and motivation to act out if things become tough for a particular member because they know they have friends to talk to.

## **Security and Partnerships with Law Enforcement**

**Challenge:** Communities are the first line of defense against extremist attacks. Research shows that a large percentage of terrorist plots have been thwarted by the Muslim American community.<sup>13</sup> This makes partnerships with law enforcement critical to any community plan for countering violent extremism.

However, as previously mentioned, one of the findings of the youth roundtable convened by the Harris County Sheriff’s Office was a lack of trust and willingness by Muslim youth to cooperate with law enforcement. This is largely due to the concern that one’s civil liberties and civil rights are at risk if one works with law enforcement. Specifically, within the Muslim community, there are perceptions of FBI informants, sting operations, and unwarranted spying on American Muslim communities. Also, the elder generation may see law enforcement as an adversary, rather than an institution meant to protect and assist them, and this mentality may be passed on to their children. For first generation immigrants, law enforcement in many of the countries they come from is terribly corrupt and not to be trusted.<sup>14</sup>

This disenchantment has extremely serious implications in that a lack of trust and cooperation leaves Houston/Harris County more vulnerable to an extremist attack. Law enforcement needs to make distinctions between the acts of radicalized individuals and the broader community.

**Words matter**, especially in a crisis situation.

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<sup>13</sup> Muslim Public Affairs Council. “Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States.” June 2012.  
<http://www.mpac.org/publications/policy-papers/post-911-terrorism-database.php>

<sup>14</sup> Moien Butt. Phone interview by Wardah Khalid. December 11, 2014.

**Opportunity:** Having **open discussions** with law enforcement that lead to trusted relationships will make Houston/Harris County a safer place for all citizens. Parents should encourage children to view the police through a cooperative, rather than an adversarial lens.

Law enforcement should deal with countering violent extremism in a manner similar to the way it deals with **street gangs**, which share many of the same characteristics with extremist groups.

**City of Houston Anti-Gang Office and Harris County Emergency Operations Center** – Has a three-sided program, “Prevention, Intercession, and Fear Reduction”, which trains communities on warning signs to look out for and addresses familial and domestic conflict, poverty, substance abuse, etc. that can create conditions for gangs (and violent extremism) to occur.

**Community Exercise with Harris County Sheriff's Office** – Conducted in June 2014, this exercise featured an unfolding scenario of possible criminal activity in a community, followed by a discussion of how law enforcement and the community can respond. The exercise allowed community members of Houston/Harris County to understand law enforcement and their procedures while simultaneously allowing law enforcement to better understand community concerns.

**DHS Quarterly Community Roundtables** – The Department of Homeland Security convenes quarterly roundtables with federal and local law enforcement with community members. These roundtables aim to better understand citizen concerns relating to homeland security and civil rights and how government representatives and law enforcement can assist in mitigating those concerns.

**Incidence Response Forum (IRF)** – The IRF enhances the security of Harris County through the engagement of Middle Eastern and South Asian communities. It serves as a two-way conduit for information sharing allowing a greater degree of direct communication between law enforcement and key civic and religious leaders.

Forum participants are convened by a conference call with local law enforcement after an incident occurs, and meet in person as often as circumstances warrant. The group might also be convened at other times as issues arise.

In addition, more work can be done in disseminating crucial information to the community, such as **who to call if a crisis erupts**. Community members should be aware of law enforcement agencies and their mandates, as well as community leaders, and emergency healthcare services they can contact in case of emergency. We have detailed our suggestions for such a plan of action at the end of this document.

The **physical security** of mosques and community centers should also be a top priority for the community. We recommend that the existing ISGH mosque physical security plan be implemented at all community facilities to protect community members from intrusion or attack.

### **Media, Messaging, and Research**

**Challenge:** Traditional and new media are filled with negative stories about Muslims and Islam that can lead to **Islamophobia**, or an irrational fear of Muslims. Calls to burn Qurans, deport Muslims, and allegations that all Muslims are terrorists further add to the vitriolic narrative. The consequences of this hate speech are alarming, as they can encourage attacks against innocent Muslims or people who “appear” Muslim. On the other side, it can also serve as rationalization for Muslims to seek revenge on those ostracizing them.

Finally, while the **internet** is a useful tool for information sharing, it can also be utilized by violent extremists to disseminate hateful ideology and incite violence in others. Many terrorist organizations recruit or spread their message online through videos, websites, e-newsletters, and photos.

**Opportunity:** A **media team** trained to quickly respond to emerging issues that could adversely affect the Muslim community can also assist in deescalating situations so that violence is less likely to occur. In addition, the team should regularly promote real stories about Muslims to local media to help fight stereotypes and build tolerance and understanding in the Houston/Harris County area. **The Andalusia Center** is an example of one existing organization that can be leveraged to achieve this goal.

**Advancing a counter-narrative** specifically regarding terrorism should also be a top priority. In addition to debunking extremist thinking and tactics during youth discussions and Jummah khutbas, mosques and community centers could hold events featuring films and talks showing the realities of life in a terrorist group. Victims of extremists could also be invited to speak about their experiences. The idea is to debunk the Islamic rhetoric terrorists use to justify their actions as well as show that the reality of their regime does not match the idealistic promises they offer vulnerable individuals.

While it may be impossible to monitor every single website in cyberspace, we recommend that community members remain vigilant in identifying potential extremists or extremist behavior online. A hotline where members can call and report sites that incite violence would be a very practical way they can assist law enforcement in assessing and halting the message of extremists from spreading further.

## **Civil Rights Considerations**

**Challenge:** It is critical that law enforcement and government agencies recognize that violent extremism is not a uniquely “Muslim” problem. Extremism is an issue that stems from individual circumstances and behaviors and can be found throughout numerous communities. Muslim communities must feel that they are **presumed innocent** and **viewed as partners** by law enforcement.

**Opportunity:** We recommend that community leaders and law enforcement work together on **cultural sensitivity trainings** for officers so that they are aware of what is and isn't acceptable while working to keep our community safe. Community members should also undergo trainings, available at local mosques and community centers, explaining their rights and which situations are appropriate for local law enforcement.

Many Muslim American civil rights and civic engagement organizations such as **Muslim Advocates**, **Muslim Public Affairs Council**, and **Muslim Legal Fund of America** offer resources on their websites to educate Muslims about their rights and how to stay safe. We recommend that these resources be available in printed copies, in addition to live trainings, at every mosque and community center in order to build robust civil rights mechanisms for our community.

The Muslim community should make a **concerted effort to track** serious concerns such as hate crimes, ethnic or religious discrimination, issues with religious accommodation in the workplace, cyber hate, bullying, and violations of religious freedom. These should be reported to the appropriate authorities and government agencies to ensure civil rights are protected and respected.

A good model to consider is the **Anti-Defamation League (ADL)**, a Jewish organization which collects information on hate crimes, workplace discrimination, and anti-Semitism. The Muslim community could gather such information as well and report it to authorities to support requests for additional resources or investigations where required.

## **Incidence Response Plan**

In case an incident does occur in Houston/Harris County, we have outlined several steps that the community should take:

- If there is an immediate emergency that jeopardizes security or safety, **contact law enforcement immediately** to assist and secure the situation.
- If there is no immediate danger, but still a concern, **contact emergency mental health services** to assess the person and decide if they should be referred for treatment. Options include:
  - Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County (MHMRA) – Has many locations throughout Houston/Harris County.
  - Texas Department of State Health Services database of Mental Health Crisis Hotlines: [www.dshs.state.tx.us/mhsa-crisishotline](http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/mhsa-crisishotline)
  - Services are also offered as a part of many hospitals and universities including Houston Methodist, The University of Texas Harris County Psychiatric Center, etc. Check individual locations to determine if the facility is inpatient/outpatient, long term treatment, and if they are open 24/7.
- In addition, community leaders should assemble through the **Incident Response Forum (IRF)** and decide what follow up action, if any, is needed.
  - The community should designate a few individuals responsible for initiating the call and a person should be designated at the Harris County Sheriff's Office that will make the determination for the necessity and logistics of the call.
- The Sheriff's Office will reach out to appropriate local, state, and federal agencies as needed.



## **Summary of Recommendations**

### **Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Personal/Family Issues**

- Offer educational workshops in mosques/community centers to eliminate mental health stigma.
- Increase community access to psychologists, social workers, substance abuse/addiction specialists, etc. perhaps through volunteer systems at local clinics/ mosques.
- Offer workshops for parents to better understand issues their children face, become familiar with the mental health warning signs, and help strengthen family bonds between generations.
- Each mosque and community organization should send a few individuals to receive Mental Health First Aid training so they are prepared to assist local constituents, should the need arise.
- Imams should obtain basic certifications in counseling services.
- Students should utilize free counseling services provided by their schools and/or school districts.

### **Muslim Youth, Interfaith, and Education Programs**

- Create dialogue promotion programs that offer youth safe spaces in a trusted environment with the support of trained mentors, counselors, psychologists, and professionals.
- Break down terrorist arguments with religious texts to correct erroneous impressions, rather than just simply telling youth they should stay away from such organizations and radical interpretations.
- Begin identity, interfaith, and education programs to help youth increase pride in their Muslim identity, gain exposure to members of other cultures and faiths, mediate social tensions, build tolerance and understanding, and clear misconceptions about Islamic teachings and extremism.

- Create a speakers bureau to educate youth on counter-narratives to terrorism as well as how to answer frequently asked questions about Islam.
- Teach youth how to be confident and deal with bullying in a healthy and productive manner.

### **Leadership and Civic Engagement**

- Youth must be given a cause they can believe in and a sense of purpose that addresses their yearning to change the world to counter what extremists offer.
- Community organizations should include a service element, and youth should be encouraged to volunteer with them and other interfaith or secular organizations to promote positivity about Islam and give back to the local community.
- We should use our diversity and strong American roots as a tool for positivity and change.
- Existing Houston/Harris County or Texas-based leadership and civic engagement programs should be supported to benefit local youth and solidify the Muslim American identity.

### **New Muslim Converts and Prison Dawah and Rehabilitation**

- Support existing prison dawah, reentry, and convert guidance programs through volunteers and funding to assist before, during, and after conversion in properly understanding Islam.
- Empower converts to get involved in the community and surround them with educated people to protect them from those who might encourage radicalism.
- Conduct periodic training of prison dawah volunteers to ensure that they emphasize a correct understanding of the Quran and Hadith to the inmates.
- The community should allow these programs to advertise in mosques and can take lessons from Christian faith based prison and reentry programs steered by churches as a successful model.

### **Religious and Community Leaders**

- Imams and community leaders should be prepared to answer tough questions on extremism and build trust with families so that they feel comfortable coming forward with their concerns.
- In addition to condemning terrorism and extremism, khutbahs should tackle tough issues by turning them into a positive message.
- Full time youth directors are a must at every single mosque in Houston/Harris County and at the very least, a youth board member.
- Parents should play an active role in the mosque and request programming relevant to them and their children. Taboo topics, should be discussed openly to create the lines of communication.
- Community building programs (service projects, dinners, lectures, etc.) are critical to increasing a sense of belonging to the mosque and in building friendships that troubled individuals can turn to.

### **Security and Partnerships with Law Enforcement**

- Having open discussions with law enforcement that lead to trusted relationships will make Houston/Harris County a safer place for all citizens.
- Parents should emphasize that law enforcement is there to assist society, rather than transfer an adversarial role.
- Law enforcement should be careful not to paint all community members with a broad brush, words matter in a crisis situation.
- Community members should be aware of law enforcement agencies, community leaders, and emergency healthcare services they can contact in case of an emergency or a troubling situation.
- The ISGH security plan should be implemented at all mosques and community centers to help protect the physical facility from intrusion or attack.

### **Media, Messaging, and Research**

- A media team trained to quickly respond to emerging issues and regularly promote real stories about Muslims can help deescalate potentially violent situations created by Islamophobia and increase tolerance, and understanding.
- Counter-narrative messaging should also be a top priority to show that the reality of terrorist regimes do not match the idealistic promises they offer vulnerable individuals.
- Community members should remain vigilant in identifying extremism online. A hotline where members can call and report sites that incite violence should be established.

### **Civil Rights Considerations**

- It is critical that law enforcement and government agencies recognize that violent extremism is not a uniquely “Muslim” problem.
- Muslim communities must feel that they are presumed innocent and viewed as partners by law enforcement.
- Community leaders and law enforcement should work together on cultural sensitivity trainings for officers.
- Printouts and trainings covering one’s rights under the law and safety recommendations should be available at every mosque and community center.
- The Muslim community should make a concerted effort to track serious concerns such as hate crimes, discrimination of extremist ideology, hate speech etc. and report such information to authorities.

# Addendum

## CVE Community Plan Kickoff Meeting

### Attendees:

**Sadia Jalali** - Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

**AJ Durrani** – General Secretary of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston (ISGH)

**Abdur Rehman Badat** – Program Coordinator of Training and Community Education at Crisis Intervention Center

**Sadia Jalali:** Many Muslim youth she's seeing in her practice come with extreme apathy, hopelessness, and no will to live. These are often children from wealthy families who feel that they can't change things and are extremely vulnerable to calls by any organization that offers them a sense of purpose. Youth need to feel comfortable with Islam. She often sees children who are barely Muslim while their parents are practicing the faith. Mental health is key, and institutions have to better educate people about this. She would like to do a basic certificate on counseling services for community leaders.

**AJ Durrani:** The media plays a significant role in that there are many Arabs who are upset because the media is so negative in its portrayal of them. ISGH has hired new imams to better relate to youth and diverse populations. Youth programs need to be bolstered and offered at every mosque with trainings for facilitators. Khutbas should be inspiring and make people feel like they can change things.

Any incidences that arise should be dealt with positively and we need to track things better (ex. As ADL does).

An Ismaili group bussed people to Masjid Hamza to teach youth how to deal with common questions about Islam. Perhaps we should get insights on how to build mental health programs from them.

**Abdur Rahman Badat:** He works a lot with Crescent Youth, which has interfaith and safe spaces. They also have a youth leadership program called the "Fajr Program." Youth need to have a sense of purpose and be taught how to deal with misinterpretations. There is a stigma surrounding mental health in the community.

### **Group suggestions of others to talk to:**

- Abdullah Oduro ("KnewU")
- Mazhar Kazi (ISGH converts class)
- Aijaz Ahmed (halfway house – prison rehab)
- Laeeq Khan (ISGH prison dawah program)
- Imam Khalis Rashad – Ibrahim Islamic Center
- Imam Wazir – Mercy Center
- Ahmed Shaheed
- Masjid al Salaam (Belfort)
- Imam Tariq (counseling)
- Idris Bello (Masjid Mumineen)
- Farrukh Shamsi (Texas Clinic)
- Obaid Kazi (ISGH khutbah committee)

## Interview 1

Salaam House – The fire marshal classified the property as commercial because they said that more than three people can't live together that aren't related by blood. The requirements to make the property commercial were cost prohibitive. Only then could they take more people. Right now, they are looking for a place to buy. Program was effective in that only 2 out of 22 former inmates went back to prison. They need intervention and engagement while in prison as well.

The Turkish community is assisting with prison dawah efforts. They accepted Muslims and non-Muslims at the Salaam House property. The reentry work is faith based but open to everyone (not explicitly Islamic) and Christian participants appreciate it as well.

They have not had issues with violent extremism. Prisons have an organized leadership (education, etc.) Inmates lead Jumma prayer and have lots of Islamic knowledge. If anything, they face harassment from people who make fun of them for what is going on overseas. That's why we have to be there to help them understand true religion. People in prison and jail may be vulnerable because they have a lower knowledge base and community. That's why reentry services are important to connect them to the community.

People are lonely in jail. We can't give them books – only the Quran and a book on salat. This is bad because they need to be able to study more.

### Suggestions of others to talk to:

ReVision Houston – works with teens

*From website: ReVision Houston intervenes in the lives of at risk and gang affected youth throughout Harris County who are between the ages of 12 and 17. Building community between positive adults and at risk youth, ReVision provides direct alternatives to help youth change their lives, develop positive life skills, and prepare for promising futures.*

## Interview 2

The issue of ISIS, jihad, etc. should be addressed directly with youth and parents – don't beat around it. Parents play the most effective role in stopping extremism. He has received phone calls from parents about it. We need to educate our parents who don't know how to answer questions on ISIS. They have to be vigilant and know who their kids' friends are and why they suddenly become religious. Where are they getting their information? There is a lack of communication between parents and kids.

Religious leaders have to be close to the kids. They have to trust you first, and he doesn't see many fulfilling that need. The imam needs to be an open and active individual. We need to train them to deal with these issues. Bring them to lectures.

A full time youth director is needed at each mosque to keep them busy with charity work, interfaith projects, etc. This should be a person that youth can open up to, is educated, and can answer questions properly.

TheJWord.org is a website that clarifies the meaning of the word "jihad."

**ISIS shirt guy:** Most of the community called the police on him. This was good but not good enough. He wishes they had spoken to him because he didn't break the law. FBI knew his rights more than they did. CLIC tried to speak with this man and Sheikh Waleed met with his family. Found that he needed a job, etc. We have to train leaders to be able to engage and be close to the community.

**Prevention:** Our community needs to have a relationship with law enforcement. Let people know what the FBI and local police think. Give youth a place to express their opinions on foreign policy, etc. We should have real discussions with local politicians involved. It helps for them to know that someone is listening to their concerns. Be vocal about people misleading others and mention them by name (ex. Anwar Al-Awlaki, Ahmed Jibreel in Detroit). Don't report these people to police – report to imams. Law enforcement has to trust leaders and let them handle situations if the line hasn't been crossed.

This is different from dealing with someone who is already extremist, such as ex-offenders who come out of jail on terrorist charges. What will we do with them when they are released? There were cases in Dallas where terrorists emerged from jail and we need a rehab program for them. Egypt has such a program. We should also catch terrorist sympathizers.

**Clear Lake Islamic Center (CLIC):** The institution tries to keep youth busy and give them proper education and people they can trust through building relationships. They invest time and money in their youth to make them leaders. Previous programs included bringing Israeli ambassadors to discuss Palestine. The youth listen, so let them be an active part of the community. They also had a father/son day where they go deep-sea fishing. This creates bonds and opens communication. They also had a town hall meeting with parents and youth.

### **Suggestions of others to talk to:**

- Zuhair Shaath (CLIC full time youth director)



### **Interview 3**

95% of the Muslims in Masjid Mumineen are from southwest Nigeria. Most Nigerians came to Houston in the late 70s and then in '85 and '86 for school or oil and gas related jobs. Now they have second generation Nigerians. They also have an organization called the Nigerian Muslim Association (NMA). The mosque is located in Southwest Houston and services are given in English and Yoruba.

The mosque does youth programs that address radicalization and what is right in Islam. There is a youth halaqa every Friday and a Sunday halaqa that covers general issues. More can be done, though, as youth deal with many issues (drugs, peer pressure, etc.). There is a need for safe spaces with more structure for youth to express their opinions and concerns without acting on them.

Communities should be upfront with the violent extremism concerns and debunk their claims. A debate showing both sides of the argument can help correct wrong impressions and will be more effective than simply condemning them.

#### **Suggestions of others to talk to:**

- Somali immigrant community – not as well integrated, gang issues, etc.
- Iesa Galloway

## Interview 4

**Background:** Convert who accepted Islam 23 years ago in Florida as a teen. Studied Islamic Law at the University of Medina, worked as an Imam in Florida and is currently in finance.

Education is key to countering violent extremism. Sometimes conversions are too few and far between to have a standing program at each mosque. Abdullah Oduro's program at Masjid Hamza is a good model because it is a central location convenient to several mosques.

Texas cases of violent extremism came from children of the community and not converts. Culturally Muslim youth are drawn to the self-esteem offered by radical programs. We need to tackle extremism online and in the mosques. We need people who are respected and accessible. Some might say "the board of the mosque doesn't respect you, so why should I?" Power struggles push away youth.

There are issues of English as a second language in that people don't understand the vernacular and approach offered by someone of a different background. Mujahid Fletcher gives one khutbah in Spanish and has a responsibility to deal with his population. Houston is very diverse, which is good because we don't have problems of prejudice. However, it is bad because mosque administrators are not doing enough to overcome barriers.

The way to overcome these barriers is by creating a sense of community for people to get to know each other. Christians see themselves as members of a church. This is not the case with Muslims. We should have dinners and service projects for people of all ages, not just youth, so that friendships are made and people can find others who understand them to talk to. We have to create a faith-based environment that transcends cultural and social relationships.

People he has spoken to aren't upset at what is happening in Iraq, but it is a proxy for them for being upset about Kashmir, Gaza, etc. and a strong sense of community helps individuals from feeling helpless.

As a teen, he needed people to talk to and a place to go. He found that space in his mosque, which had a diligent and good Imam. Here in Houston, you can walk into a mosque and no one talks to you. The exception to this would be Clear Lake Islamic Center (CLIC).

### **Suggestions of others to talk to:**

- Mujahid Fletcher
- Kabeer Muhammad
- Waleed Basyouni (Imam of CLIC)

## Interview 5

1) Teenagers spend lots of time on the internet. There are 3-4 sites by non-Muslims whose only purpose is to create anger against Muslims. They put up material to make people angry. Their goal is to make Muslim youth angry and react.

2) As first generation immigrants, we never had a relationship with the police, CIA, etc. because we were always seeing them as our adversaries in our home countries. Law enforcement in many of the countries we come from was terribly corrupt and not to be trusted. We pass on this mentality to our kids. There is no cordial relationship. This needs to be addressed. Parents don't convey that these people are there to protect you.

3) Most CVE discussions involve grown-ups. We need to educate and train young people to identify their peers who are not on the right track. Most adults won't be able to reach troubled young people with negative thoughts. We see school violence here in the U.S. Parents don't know about the kids who are on a dangerous path but their peers do.

## Interview 6

MAS Katy has a full time dedicated youth director. They serve youth with religious programs. They also have monthly events (service project, interfaith, etc.) and sports activities (kung fu, basketball, soccer, etc.). They also have a youth retreat in San Antonio over Thanksgiving. They emphasize programs for brothers and sisters. Programs include parents as well, such as the Scout programs. There are bullying and drug programs where parents get involved during discussions.

Their Jumma prayer service has 500-600 people.

They have an intellectual community and most people understand that extremism is wrong. The challenge is the narrative of the extremists; terrorist videos showing Westerners joining their cause are highly troubling.

Mosque Board: The executive committee is age 20 and older, the youth have power in their community.

## Interview 7

Shariq founded the Fajr program eight years ago. The program has had 35 graduates since then. He thought it was necessary for leadership and to make the community stronger. The program teaches students that they shouldn't feel limited and also teaches basic Islamic skills. It is similar to a fraternity or sorority.

Students mostly come from South and Southwest Houston because it is based in the City's South side. Starts right after Fajr (6 AM) on Saturdays and runs until 10 AM.

Model for safe spaces: All levels have open discussions about terrorism and extremism. Safe spaces are conducive to ask fearful questions. There is a very special bond between students and teachers. It is a closed environment where no recording is allowed and things can be kept private. If someone doesn't know something, they can ask another teacher, and usually someone has an answer. Safe spaces are possible but it would have to be an environment of mutual trust.

Other CVE involvement: Assisted with "PREVENT" strategy in London, but he was not fond of the strategy. They had a very government-centric approach that essentially turned mosque officials into spies. It was not a grassroots solution.



## Interview 8

He is a graduate of the Fajr Program and has been teaching there for the last three years. The program is not tied to any particular mosque, but its classes are held once a week at Masjid Sabireen. Most of the students are from South Houston. The program is very selective and by invitation only. They may start with 12 students in the beginning class, but it may drop to four by the end.

The program spans four semesters, 9 weeks each, and has four levels which explore different aspects of Islam.

In addition to Islamic learning, the program offers team building activities after class with a focus on diversity as well as community involvement opportunities, such as a volunteer fair, and connecting students with different initiatives. Most of the students who go through the program end up helping with Crescent Youth programs.

The program looks for people who are committed and has a sort of fraternity/sorority system in that students further along in the program get more privileges (ex. better breakfasts, not having to clean up). The Fajr Program makes a concerted effort to get people to meet with others different from them. They have an outing once a semester, such as rafting.

Graduates of the program have had positive feedback. They enjoyed it, had a meaningful experience, and gained a lot of knowledge. They also are likely to stay involved in the community through Fajr Program alumni iftars, etc. Graduates have a sense of initiative and execute a project each semester.

The last level (level 4) has lots of discussions and Q&A.

It is a good avenue for activism and civic engagement.

Suggestions: Sunday schools have all types of students. There should be discussion components and not just Islamic knowledge (ex. thoughts on cheating, women-only mosques, etc.) The Fajr Program looks at the discussion topics the New York Times releases each year and uses those. The key is to keep the atmosphere emerging and open. This could help with alienation issues.

iLeap – Sunday school at Dulles Masjid. Has large refugee population.

### **Suggestions of others to talk to:**

- Shariq Ghani (founder of Fajr program)
- Haroon Hussein (iLEAP)
- Yameen Rahman (iLEAP)

## Interview 9

Mr. Kazi serves as a Muslim chaplain for the Harris County Jail. He goes every Thursday if six or more people request to speak with him. He also works with FreeQuran.com, which sends Qurans to people all over the country. For the last 21 years, he has been teaching a New Muslim class for ISGH. The class focuses on how to live a peaceful life and teaches only basic moral values, not rituals. It is attended by non-Muslims but there is no preaching involved. Quran and Hadith are used indirectly and similarities with Christianity and Judaism are discussed. He does not address issues of violent extremism or global issues in class. Anyone who wants to discuss more detailed questions can have dinner with him after class.

## Interview 10

As the Khutbah Chairman for ISGH, Mr. Kazi says that we do not have a violent extremism problem in Houston. This report should be framed as a community building plan and not an anti-radicalization plan.

New ISGH imams: They appeal to different demographics; a young imam may not be dealing with elders and a Hispanic imam won't always mesh with Pakistanis. The choice of imam doesn't solve the problem of extremist beliefs in Islam. Isa Parada had a YouTube video on anti-radicalization that the government paid more attention to it than the community did.

Today, youth are looking for spirituality.

Khutbas: He does try to make them positive and inspiring. They are bringing younger khateebis, not because of radicalization, but because their style is more Islamic and emphasizes what is good about the faith. There is an art to tackling multiple issues and making them positive. We should not emphasize anti-radicalism. Instead, we should promote the positive about Islam so that there is no room for radicalization.

He sent some khateebis to Qalam Institute in Dallas for trainings, but he would rather tackle this in the city in the future. He is trying to do mentorship for khateebis for one-on-one help.

In summary, frame this plan as community building. That is what we need.

## Interview 11

The U.S. receives about 80,000 refugees per year and of those, Houston receives between 3-4,000. Last year, Houston received the most number of refugees in the U.S. Refugees arrive from over 40 countries, with the top countries being Iraq, Burma, and Butan. There are also an increasing number of refugees from the Congo.

Amanaah Refugee Services provides three services to refugees upon their arrival in Houston:

- 1) Financial Assistance – Amanaah works with government-contracted non-profits (ex. Interfaith Ministries) and helps with rent after the initial 3-5 months of support that the government pays for.
- 2) In-Kind Program – Furniture, food, household items, etc. are available for purchase at the Amanaah store.
- 3) After School Program – Over 50% of refugees are school age. Amanaah works with Alief and HISD to provide academic and social support for elementary and middle school children.

Amanaah is currently revising their program but they believe it currently helps refugees integrate well into Houston society. The program is unique because it is not a resettlement program and is not for a specific community. Churches, mosques, etc. also have similar services but on a smaller scale.

There have not been many Somali refugees in the last 10 years.

Older children do have some identity issues, but it is more about gang culture (drugs, trouble with the law, etc.) and not religious extremism. It is very difficult for refugees to get clearance to arrive here, so there is less of a chance of them being extremist if they are approved.

### Suggestions of others to talk to:

- Nicole Ellis of PAIR (Partnership for the Advancement and Immersion of Refugees)
- Shireen Herman, HISD Refugee Coordinator

## Interview 12

Started in 1993, the ISGH Prison Dawah program sends volunteers and full time Muslim chaplains to 50-60 prisons a month. Inmates receive a copy of the Quran, books on Islamic basics and the Messengers, and Quranic Arabic language instruction materials. All volunteers must apply and attend a three hour orientation before they are granted access to the prisons. Each prison has about 150 Muslims, and of those, 80-85% are convert. The dawah program focuses on teaching Islamic principles such as patience, compassion, and prayer as well as assists converts with implementing them in their lives. Over 2,000 individuals have converted to Islam since the program's inception.

Materials provided to inmates include:

- Holy Quran (Abdullah Yusuf Ali and color coded tajweed)
- "Islam, Beliefs and Teachings" by Ghulam Sarwar
- "Dictionary of the Holy Quran" by Abdul Mannan Omar
- DVDs such as "The Message"
- PowerPoints on the depiction of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in classic literature

Inmates read the material and teach themselves from it. They learn to recite the Quran correctly as well. The state jails don't allow inmates to get together for Jummah prayer, so they have to do them 3-4 times individually.

Dr. Khan hopes to have an "Islam 101" room in every mosque. There is currently one at Champions. The program costs about \$25 - \$30,000 a year and is funded by donors.

Aijaz Ahmed's prison rehabilitation program was first run under the Shifa Clinic for one year. It is currently attempting to work with the Turkish Center.

### Suggestions of others to talk to:

- Aijaz Ahmed – works with parolees

## Interview 13

**Background:** Originally from Ghana, his father was an architect who came to work for the city. His mother was a pastor and his entire family was Christian. Oduro stumbled across Sunni Islam after going through some bad situations and became more serious about life after he realized there was a purpose to it. He converted in 1996 and wanted to learn Arabic. He attended HCC for training as a surgical tech and studied Islam until 1999 when he also performed Hajj.

His conversion was not a warm experience but also not bad. He faced some stereotypes for being black and a convert by the Muslim community. His masjid is primarily Nigerian and he has dealt with single moms, drug users, etc. but they are all faithful. These circumstances can cause aggravation.

“ReKnew” – this term refers to people who were born Muslim but never gravitated to Muslim culture. They are part of the American fabric so they look for someone like them who “get it.”

“KnewU” is based on those two demographics: convert and renewed (born again).

CVE Implications: Converts and born again Muslims are experiencing an “iman [faith] high” and realizing they want to live a life ultimately about pleasing their Creator and not others. This sentiment can steer people in the wrong direction if they encounter bad mentors or misunderstand Quranic verses, etc. They may become aggravated toward non-Muslim society or they may meet other uneducated Muslims who steer them in the wrong direction. Thus, it is imperative that new Muslims have someone proper to guide them and educate them. We need to go back to knowledge and patience to learn and have consistency in social and education programs.

KnewU offers 8 week seminars as well as a 2-3 day seminar for new Muslims. It also offers online classes. They used to have potlucks every two months, but not enough new Muslims were attending.

People who are converting: College aged people (renewed), those in mixed religious relationships such as a Muslim girl with a non-Muslim boy. Some become Muslim in the class or the masjid. Usually it is a friend who brings them.

Education materials used: His ebook (“Keys to Guidance”) covers the Shahadah, purification and prayer and how to approach the Quran and Hadith.

Oduro suggests integrating new Muslims into the mosque community by empowering them and getting them involved. Ask them to give a two minute story on their conversion, for example. We all have a responsibility for new Muslims.

### **Suggestions of others to talk to:**

- Obaid Kazi and Mazhar Kazi (ISGH)
- Shariq Ghani (Crescent Youth)
- Waleed Basyouni (Clear Lake Islamic Center)
- Isa Parada (Youth and marriage counselor at Masjid al-Sabireen)

## Interview 14

Mr. Parada deals extensively with youth and has been working with Muslim youth for 17 years. He deals with converts and English and Spanish speakers at Masjid as-Sabireen and other mosques in Southwest Houston as well.

Masjid as-Sabireen offers programs for people between the ages of 20 and 45 and also high school/early college. These include a two year, youth-taught program for 10 people on evolution, atheism, and sexism and how Islam deals with it. They aim to make the youth proud of being Muslim.

Before 9/11, he and Abdullah Oduro (KnewU) noticed that there were not that many converts in the community so it was easier to have mentors. But after 9/11, the number of new Muslims jumped and there were not enough people to guide them.

There are two issues that the Muslim community faces when it comes to converts:

- 1) The community doesn't see the importance in their issues
- 2) The Muslim community is very exclusive

People don't see what converts had to go through to get to their position. They need to open up and accept these programs.

**CVE:** Parada encountered the extremist ideology a year into Islam. His close friend was talking about politics and bad Muslim leaders and calling them disbelievers. Parada was taught by good teachers, though, and knew the Hadith about calling another Muslim a disbeliever. He was able to use this information to inform the friend about the Kharijites in Islam. Parada has seen a lot of this with converts and young people around the world. The issue comes down to this: when all you have seen since you were young is Muslims in a negative light (being oppressed, etc.) and someone else comes and says "we can return to glory", people with low self-esteem can get caught up in that.

There was an instance in the days following 9/11 when Parada overheard kids in a youth group referring to the attackers by name and as their heroes. He immediately confronted the youth and emphasized that the attackers killed innocent people and that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) warned against this group. The kids returned and admitted that they were being bullied in school and appreciated the talk. They had been discussing becoming a gang and were so lost that they didn't realize what they were doing.

Parada believes the community must be more proactive about this. Kids want to belong to something strong, so when all they saw was Muslim weakness in the past, they are attracted to strength (such as what terrorist groups present) and want to join them. This methodology and thinking is similar to that used by gangs. Most of the children joining are suburban kids. They are getting bullied, are traumatized from their treatment by others, and not strong in their faith. As a convert, Parada said he never felt weak as a Muslim.

Muslims aren't the only group to go through this. Immigrants and other groups had to deal with this as well and some groups did go to extremes to rectify things (ex. Black Panthers, Latino separatist groups, etc.). The community must be educated on this broad perspective and that it is not a problem specific to one race.

**CVE Suggestions:** Youth programs are needed but what we are really lacking are education programs focusing on parents in their mid-30s and 40s. This segment of the community is more open to these programs but they won't show up if it's just an imam speaking. So bring a guy who heads a gang task force as well as an imam.

More programs are needed on taboos such as drugs. They had a successful program three years ago at Clear Lake Islamic Center with a psychologist, doctor, and police officer where youth and adults attended. The police officer showed attendees what certain drugs looked like while the doctor discussed the side effects. Iesa Galloway did a similar program on the north side of town.

Programs for imams are also necessary so that they are better equipped to deal with these issues. We also need to work with community institutions. Things are going to get worse if we don't do anything.

The Catholic community does a great job of offering different programs for different people in the community, such as newlyweds, divorced, etc. Where are our programs? We need drug prevention, domestic violence, etc. programs and we can learn from other groups. We could share best practices but need people dedicated to that mission to tie everyone together.

Houston is blessed because we have a diverse population and a spokesperson to speak on our behalf to different groups. (Ex. He might not get through to a Nigerian the way a Nigerian would simply because of the way he speaks). We should use our diversity as a tool for positivity and to express ideas in a proper fashion.



## Interview 15

Risala Foundation would call themselves a speakers' bureau. They invite many spiritual leaders to speak to the community. Last year, they focused on more activist types. Risala's target group is young professionals (the "unmosqued" crowd). They stay away from politics and periodically partner with other organizations such as MAS, ICNA, ISNA, etc. Risala is fully funded by local private donors.

Synott Masjid is very conservative and old fashioned and has a big disconnect between youth and adults. Haroon Ullah spoke there on "Faith Based Engagement in America" and covered topics like refugees, economic justice, etc. 200 people showed up and it really resonated with them. They asked him to come back and speak because they saw a connection – it connected global issues to the local community (talked about Malala, etc.)

Risala has done events on CVE after the Boston Bombings. They had Sheikh Alladin Al-Bakri discuss it during his khutbah that weekend and how we should reject it. They also held a family camp to get families together and connect and learn from speakers such as Jihad Turk, Tahir Anwar, and Altaf Hussein. The idea is for the community members to work together upon their return. They had people from all over Houston and it was sold out.

Their model is to choose a respectful speaker and a topic and shop it to different mosques. Not a single mosque has turned them down because they know it will be a quality event.

They are working with ISNA on programming for the March convention. They will be discussing topics like domestic violence, modesty in the media age, tolerance, racism, anger, declining temptation, etc.

Houston has a mistrust factor and the community doesn't have discussions on these topics. They should bring in high profile speakers to assist with that.

### **Suggestions of others to talk to:**

- Afshan Haque (mental health)

## Interview 16

The weekend school program takes place at Masjid as Sabireen with about 200 -250 students participating every Sunday. The challenge they had 5-6 years ago was that kids who were graduating weren't eligible for other things and not old enough to be volunteers, but they still wanted to engage them. They created the Islamic leadership excellence achievement program (iLEAP). It keeps the students engaged at the community center and keeps them coming for another 2 years or so until high school age when they can be volunteers.

Sunday school ages: students are finished by age 13 or 14. They are assigned books on subjects like Islamic studies, Quran, hadith, and current affairs.

iLEAP was divided into four levels: pioneer, achiever, leader, middle level. They would progress from level to level each semester. The teachers were really the mentors. Hasan Gopalani helped recruit them. They were paid a nominal stipend to cover gas expenses, etc. Mentors would come in the morning and host Islamic classes – more like discussion groups (ex. What is relevant in the media these days) moderated by mentors. The next class would explain certain surah and discussion around it. They would then break for lunch. In the afternoon, they would get together and do more interactive activities like amazing race, trivia team, field trips, picnics, etc.

During the first three years, iLEAP had about 15 students. This later grew to 35 students. A sign of success was that the kids who finished the entire curriculum kept coming back to do the program.

**Challenges:** The biggest challenge was keeping mentors. They were college kids who had their own responsibilities. Commitment varied significantly between them, and they were not all dependable. The quality of the program depended on the mentors. The program excelled if they had disciplined and dependable mentors. Mentors reported to a coordinator who reported to the board. The program is still going on with about 28-30 kids. They don't have levels anymore because it was hard to maintain because they didn't have enough mentors to handle each level. Now the whole group moves together.

Refugee population – There was a Somali refugee population that maintained a school called al Qamar with about 80-100 students who came to Houston over the last 10-15 years. They were having financial and management issues and reached out to ISGH. ISGH tried to get them stable first w/ funding (lights, etc.) for a year. Afterwards, they decided to combine them with an existing mosque. About 44 came to Masjid al Sabireen and were absorbed into the weekend Islamic school. The rest went into Masjid Maryam and Hamza masjid. About 8-10 were iLEAP age kids.

The Sabireen community tried to welcome them with gifts and back-to school supplies, etc. They announced their arrival 2-3 weeks in advance and asked people to help them feel welcome. They did see that Sabireen was a much nicer facility than what they were used to. There were no significant cultural flare ups – but it has only been 4 months since the move.

**CVE:** All this stuff was a concern. There was lots of discussion within the iLEAP board on whether they needed to talk about it. The general feedback was that ISIS, etc. were so out of bounds of Islamic practice that no one is questioning that it has nothing to do with Islam. Kids weren't coming back to the mentors and asking about it. By talking about it and trying to disassociate, we may be creating a problem that doesn't exist. They are more concerned about praying jummah in the masjid, eating halal, girls wearing hijab, etc. They aren't old enough to appreciate the impact of terrorism, ISIS, etc. His own boys knew it was dumb and had nothing to do with Islam and that they didn't need to talk about it.

But they do make sure that relationships with mentors are strong so they can ask these questions comfortably if they have them.

**Suggestion:** Our community is lacking in quality volunteers. Most people think about volunteering at the masjid. We should be an asset to the larger community and that idea needs to be really cultivated. We focus on Iman and Islamic identity so we also need to focus on the larger community.

## Interview 17

Mr. Rashaad works with ex-offenders. They are not always Muslims. Most of the members of Ibrahim Islamic Center are converts. They offer different initiatives each month:

- Economic and financial development for ex-offenders (how to get a job, start a business, resume building, etc.). They have a 6-8 week entrepreneurship program and try to get micro financing or a grant to start businesses. They try to help people figure out their passion. This is on an 'as needed' basis.
- Interfaith work – helping people understand Islam better. They work with African American churches and support homeless shelters.
- His personal initiatives: Interviews, volunteering in prisons, etc.

His mosque space is small because they are doing things outside the mosque. The main focuses are social justice, economic and financial development/entrepreneurship, and interfaith work. Their jummah prayer has about 25-40 people. Congregants are drawn to the faith because it is welcoming (open space for sisters and they are on the board). Many young Muslims like his vibe and relevant message. Some converted long ago or through readings on their own. Others converted from dawah or while in prison.

**Prisons:** Volunteers have to be approved by going through a 3-4 hour orientation with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. They then pick a prison unit. Sometimes, he is invited by prisoners for special programs on social justice, etc. He gives Jummah prayer occasionally.

**Educating converts:** He is not involved too deeply in this aspect. He does provide them a Quran without tafsir, a few lectures, and a prayer rug. People will go to mosques that are most convenient for them.

**Extremism:** There is no extremist element. When people walk in and see no barriers between brothers and sisters, they run away. It is the least of their worries. They are all American of all different backgrounds. People just want a good relevant message.

**Seerah:** He teaches the class with a social justice perspective. He gave students an assignment on ISIS with articles to read and asked them why they are wrong. They also have mostly African American population that supports American religious leaders like Sh. Hamza Yusuf and Imam WDM.

**Suggestions:** If people have a gut feeling that someone is headed in the wrong Islamic direction, then the best solution is to have an Imam or knowledgeable person speak to the person. If they are American, they can call Imam Wazir to talk to them and see where this person is coming from and if they have issues of poverty, psychology, personal, etc.

**Safe spaces:** He considers his mosque a safe space. It hosts events to talk about different issues and sisters share their experiences. The key element: trust forms in a small community.

## Interview 18

This is the ninth year of operation for ILM Academy. It started with pre-school and pre-k and added a grade each year. They wanted an Islamic school grounded in American culture and society. There is nothing explicitly American but all programs are grounded in that. The student body goes up to 7th grade and will eventually go to 8th. 75% are Indian/Pakistani and the rest are Arab, Hispanic, and Anglo American. Most of their parents were raised in the U.S., which is something unique to the school.

The curriculum in elementary grades is focused on character development (dealing with bullying, respecting other cultures, etc.) Most of the population is young so countering violent extremism is not a major concern. The 7th graders are studying world history, so maybe it comes up there, but not explicitly. If it does, they simply say it does not represent Islam.

Their approach to teaching Islam is very nurturing and loving. They focus on tolerance, respect, beliefs, etc. They took older children to the Holocaust museum and synagogue to expose them to different religions and civil rights movements. Politicians come and talk to them about being involved. They do lots of charity projects.

Being second generation, these students have never had the pre-9/11 comfort level like we did. But maybe they are getting a different perspective at home. They see the U.S. as home. The middle school children are aware but sheltered. They see these extremism issues as foreign.

More programs are needed to teach how to deal with violent extremism as kids transition out of Islamic school. Resources, ideas, and speakers can help make that happen. As a community, we don't really know how to approach the topic with our kids. Perhaps they can do trainings at Sunday schools or Islamic schools with Muslim men and women.

### Suggestions of others to talk to:

- Najat al-Sayed (college counselor and vice principal at Dar-al-Alqam)

## Interview 19

Zuhair joined CLIC in March 2014. It was the first full time youth program. Before his arrival, youth were running the program but it was not sustainable after they graduated.

CLIC does a lot of social activities for youth that are mentorship based so that younger kids have role models.

- Friday night – For 10th grade students and younger (ages 9-14) where they discuss stories of companions, life, parents, etc.
- Saturday morning – Educational, low teacher/student ratio. Tuition is charged and they have about 40 students.
- Sunday morning – For older children and they cover religious and life basics and spirituality.

The purpose of these programs is to get youth to the mosque and they can socialize afterwards. Parents stay in the community hall during the programs. About 100 youth are in the mosque each week, with about 60-70 unique individuals. CLIC is also planning an after school program that will offer skills workshops, public speaking, etc.

There is a big Egyptian population at the Center so sometimes political issues will come up. Youth understand that ISIS is un-Islamic. People might be discussing these issues more on social media or emails. He recalls one instance where someone felt confused and talked to him for a few hours. He then pushed Sheikh Waleed to do a program on ISIS.

Suggestions: There is a need for safe spaces to work with community leaders. Also, all mosques need youth leaders. The best way is mentorship and community leadership. They have informal mentorship now but will increase it during the after-school programs. At CLIC, they have found it a bit difficult to have older mentors because of people going off to college.

Mosque boards: There are so many people discussing youth during their campaigns, but do not ask youth to speak for themselves. He suggests the voter age be lowered to 16 so that they can have an input as to who is speaking for them. At the very least, create a youth board position.

The board at CLIC isn't elected but rather chosen by Sheikh Waleed based on their involvement, etc. If people are good, then the organization will be good.

### **Suggestions of others to talk to:**

- Sarah Sultan (youth therapist who did anxiety program at CLIC)

## Interview 20

Founded in the 1950s, they are the oldest Muslim community in the city of Houston. They were first a part of Nation of Islam and later changed when the Masjid's founder switched to Sunni Islam. The present day mosque was established in 1978.

**Prison outreach:** They have several Muslim chaplains that go to the prisons. They also have a program called "Freemen of the city", which was founded by Imam Tyerre Amin of Galveston. The group meets once a month at the mosque and assists brothers in establishing themselves outside of the prison environment and serving the community. These brothers converted while in prison and receive support (help finding jobs, homes, etc.) and are encouraged to participate in mosque activities. They also have a halfway house.

Masjid WDM also has a New Muslim Orientation that is ongoing with basic information and teachings of their founding Imam. They communicate the tafsir [interpretation] in an American and understandable way. They do provide new Muslims with copies of the Quran (Abdullah Yusuf Ali) and encourage them to ask questions. They deal with questions such as "What is the different between Islam and Christianity?" but not any global questions. People are converting in prison and also those born Muslim who weren't active in the community in the past. There are also some college students.

**Leadership class:** This class was created because there was no succession plan for older imams. This program helps establish imams by teaching them how to run a masjid, fundraise, etc.

**Youth programs:** The mosque has a Saturday class for the last 4-5 years which teaches basics of Islam for youth 17 and below. They have about 30-50 students and teach Islamic Studies and some Arabic.

**Mentorship:** The mosque does not have any regular anti-bullying program but they do have mentorship and self-empowerment. They encourage youth to be proud of who they are and help with confidence issues (such as for hijab). They have sisters and brothers-only programs as well that teach them the importance of good character and working hard and being successful.

**Camp Khalil:** This is a national Muslim youth leadership program at Camp Allen. During the camp, they offer intensive education on Islamic knowledge, bullying, etc. They also have a youth retreat where they deal with bullying away from parents. Kids can discuss whatever they want there.

People who gravitate to this Mosque have a more balanced view of Islam because they are well-integrated into the U.S. Their kids are not concerned about ISIS.

## Interview 21

Ms. Sultan led an anxiety program for Clear Lake Islamic Center on how to evoke change while going through a struggle. It was for all ages from teens to middle age.

She states that there is a mental health stigma in the community.

Before moving to Houston, she worked for a 24/7 treatment center and also with teens in crisis in a residential treatment center. Issues she saw included aggression, suicide, etc. One client had homicidal plans. There were very few Muslims.

The treatment for the homicidal client was a team effort involving individual, family, and group therapy. He talked to different counselors to help him differentiate between his identity and his thoughts. This empowered him to realize that even though he thought about hurting others, he could not act on it.

**Suggestions:** Knowledge is power. We need more events on mental health. It is good to associate them with the mosques because it helps eliminate stigmas. Also, workshops for parents to understand mental health warning signs are key. Parents are in a bubble, so we have to educate them about what teens here go through.

Teens also need a sense of belonging, which is why these groups are appealing to them. We must educate them on the real issues (CVE, porn, etc.) to improve the community as a whole.

### **In case of an incident:**

- 1) The parent/guardian should contact emergency mental health services and assess the person to either be hospitalized or sent to a treatment facility. They can then determine if police involvement is necessary. Or they can simultaneously contact police in beginning.
- 2) Utilize outpatient therapy if the case is less severe.