

## Prominent Bloomington woman's nonprofit claimed to feed 6,400 children per day

Deena Winter

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The state Department of Human Services awarded Ayan Abukar with an “outstanding refugee” entrepreneurship award last year. Even as the state was lauding her service to the community, Abukar’s nonprofit was claiming to feed 6,400 children per day, multiple times per day, via what federal prosecutors now say was a fraud-riddled federal child nutrition program.

Abukar founded Action for East African People, which had eight meal distribution sites in 2020 and 2021: one in Savage, three in Minneapolis and four in Bloomington, according to state records. Three of the addresses are apartment buildings, one an apartment complex for seniors, one is a townhome, one has a restaurant in it now and one is an office building. One of their sites is listed at a Bloomington address that does not exist, and was also listed as the distribution site for another agency claiming to feed 1,500 children per day. And one of the apartment buildings is also listed as a distribution site for two other organizations, including one whose deputy director is a former key aide to Bernie Sanders’ Iowa presidential campaign who went on to work as a consultant for Feeding Our Future, a nonprofit that prosecutors say is at the center of the \$250 million fraud.

Several of AEAP’s sites were also listed as food distribution sites by other organizations: Two of AEAP’s sites were listed in the same Minneapolis address (now a restaurant) and each claimed to be feeding 1,500 children a snack and supper every day in September 2021. A third entity, the Somali-American Peace Council, claimed to be feeding 3,000 vended meals per day from the same building. A senior apartment building where AEAP said it was feeding 500 kids daily was also listed as a distribution site for a group that reported feeding 1,500 kids per day there.

Abukar, who did not respond to a request for comment, has not been charged with a crime.

A ninth site application was denied by the state after the sponsoring agency, Partners in Nutrition, was terminated from the program in May this year.

The state stopped payments to Partners in Nutrition, a St. Paul nonprofit, in January after the FBI served search warrants, and some of the sites that Partners in Nutrition sponsored were charged in connection with a massive \$250 million fraud.

Although Partners in Nutrition employees have not been charged with crimes, the state Department of Education — which administered the federal program — has said Partners in Nutrition was “directly responsible for distributing \$58 million in misappropriated funds.”

Partners in Nutrition sued, asking a federal judge to reverse the state’s decision, but the judge recently refused to reinstate the nonprofit.

Action for East African People’s application for a ninth site is listed among 213 sites denied by the state this year, according to a document filed in the lawsuit.

Another document shows Action for East African People was denied funding for meal claims at its sites for delivering grocery ingredients instead of meals; items on invoices not matching menus; and missing invoices.

Since announcing 48 indictments in connection with what he called the biggest pandemic relief program fraud in the nation, U.S. Attorney Andrew Luger said more indictments are coming, and has since indicted a few more people.

Abukar was given the “outstanding refugee” award from the DHS resettlement program in 2021 for founding two health care clinics to serve East Africans.

DHS said in a statement, “DHS is not in a position to comment on law enforcement’s ongoing investigation.”

She won the award even though DHS revoked her child care license in 2019 for “providing false and misleading information and failure to comply with licensing laws and rules” over the course of years.

She took over a child care center in 2012, and then, in response to her clients’ needs, she founded Action for East African People in 2017, according to her website. As a part of AFEAP, she founded Action Care Community Clinic & Dental in Bloomington and the Action Healing and Wellness Center in Burnsville — the basis for the DHS award.

On her website, she said she has received a number of fellowships, including from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., and has served with the US Africa Chamber of Commerce, USA African Advisory Board and Advocacy Think Tank and the National Small Business Association Leadership Council.

According to the DHS website, she was born in Ethiopia but was forced by civil unrest into refugee camps in Kenya before immigrating to the U.S. in 1998.

She was also honored as a “notable neighbor” by the city of Bloomington in October 2020, for founding the Action Care Community Clinic and helping African immigrants get health care.