

Minnesota Reformer

COMMENTARY

Feeding Our Future, four years later: Lessons learned



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FBI agents search the Shakopee townhome of Abdimajid Mohamed Nur, who was convicted in a Feeding Our Future case and then convicted again for attempting to bribe a juror. (Photo by Madison McVan/Minnesota Reformer)

Four years ago this week, FBI agents raided dozens of sites all over the Twin Cities metro, collecting evidence that dozens of people were falsely claiming to feed hungry children and fraudulently collecting millions of dollars in taxpayer money.

The investigation has led to 78 indictments and nearly 60 convictions, and sprawled well beyond its namesake, Feeding Our Future, which is the nonprofit at the center of the scheme.

Investigative journalists and law enforcement discovered that some of the child meal fraudsters were also in the child autism business, while others were collecting money to (not) provide housing stability for the homeless. The state has identified 14 Medicaid programs at risk of significant fraud and instituted an anti-fraud protocol that's delaying critical funding from some legitimate providers and their vulnerable clients. As predicted, the fraud is undermining support for public programs that had helped make Minnesota an island of social democracy in the Upper Midwest.

The image of leading Democrats like Gov. Tim Walz and Attorney General Keith Ellison has been tarnished by the scandal. More important: My entire community is now under siege because of the actions of the fraudsters – and the politicians who looked the other way.

In short, Feeding Our Future has upended the state's social service programs and its politics.

We'd do well to learn some lessons:

1. [It's bigger than you know, and some people are likely going to walk.](#)

The *Reformer* reviewed Minnesota Department of Education data for meal sites that claimed to have served at least \$1 million from the two main federal programs that were fleeced between 2020 and 2021. Prosecutors have charged defendants associated with roughly half of those 126 meal sites. In other words, people associated with fully half of the sites in which MDE paid out at least \$1 million have thus far escaped charges.

Among the notable institutions and people who participated in the meals program but have not been charged: a nonprofit founded by a well-known athlete, houses of worship, the wife of a

politician. There's no evident indication that they are being investigated by federal law enforcement or that charges are forthcoming, so the Reformer isn't naming them.

The lead federal prosecutor on the case, Joseph Thompson, has resigned, joined by other key attorneys on the case, which doesn't bode well for more Feeding Our Future charges. The case may be winding down, but the ramifications will be with us for many years.

2. Government officials suffered from a failure of imagination.

When the *Reformer* asked the Department of Human Services in 2023 whether Feeding Our Future defendants had any contracts with the agency, DHS — after stonewalling for months — gave a curious response: Half the people indicted in the federal Feeding Our Future case, DHS said, “have no record of working in current DHS-funded services.” Meaning, the other half, at some point, received other state contracts.

This should have been a serious wakeup call to DHS. The thieves were in the building. If they examined the Feeding Our Future cases closely, they'd see the scale and brazenness of the theft — people set up entire companies with the sole purpose of stealing from the public.

DHS should have known that if the fraudsters were doing it with Feeding Our Future, they would do the same with DHS programs, especially programs with low barriers to entry. Until the Legislature finally acted, for instance, you didn't need a license to be an autism services provider. That's how you get a 3,000% increase in spending in five years.

3. Elected and government officials suffered from a failure of nerve.

Let's recall the political moment: George Floyd had been murdered by Minneapolis police not two years prior, and Minnesota's business and political establishment was publicly agonizing over the state's vast disparities in income, education and health between white and Black Minnesotans.

Feeding Our Future ringleader Aimee Bock, who is white, tried to use the legal system and her strong political network to bully bureaucrats and politicians to keep the money flowing when the Department of Education made a feckless effort to rein it in. She largely succeeded.

State Sen. Omar Fateh, DFL-Minneapolis, [said in June 2021](#) — at a party to celebrate Feeding Our Future’s legal victory over the Department of Education — that their pressure campaign was paying off: “What I can tell you is that leadership hears you. Folks at the Capitol hear you. The pressure is really on, and ... it’s working.”

People who work at DHS probably want to help people who need it and never imagined themselves tasked with stamping out widespread fraud in well-intentioned programs. This is understandable, but they failed nonetheless.

Ryan Pacyga, an attorney who has represented several defendants charged by the U.S. Attorney’s Office, told *The New York Times* that it was so easy that some defendants were sure the state was tolerating the fraud. “No one was doing anything about the red flags. It was like someone was stealing money from the cookie jar and they kept refilling it.”

Even when DHS referred potential child care fraud to law enforcement, the agency balked when it came time to help the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, [according to a recent KARE 11 report](#).

The problem with finding fraud is that when you find it, you have to confront it, which would be a serious headache for Democrats and their allies in the Somali community.

4. Without a largely apolitical Minnesota Office of U.S. Attorney, the fraud would have gone on unabated for years.

The raids occurred during the Biden administration. Then-U.S. Attorney Andy Luger announced the first charges in 2022. The lead prosecutor became the acting U.S. attorney and continued the investigation, taking it in new directions, including Medicaid fraud. This consistency — and a record of piling up convictions — gave the investigation bipartisan credibility and focused the minds of Minnesotans on an issue that needed it.

Unfortunately, the investigation now risks being badly politicized. It's unclear who will replace Thompson, but we know right-wing politicians and influencers have become central figures in the fraud issue. That's likely to polarize the issue and turn Democrats — who are a majority of the state — into skeptics.

5. We Somalis needed mature political leadership from elected officials from our community.

Unfortunately, we didn't get that leadership. The first response to the investigation by some newly empowered Somali politicians was to allege discrimination.

At a June 2021 celebration when Feeding Our Future won a court victory, Minneapolis City Council Member Jamal Osman* crowed that he'd pushed back on state bureaucrats: "I'm one of those people that push back and call it what it is. Which is racist tactics," Osman said.

In December 2021, just weeks before the FBI raid, [Fateh spoke](#) at the 1st Annual Somali American Elected Officials Town Hall and alleged that the Minnesota education and health departments, as well as DHS, were "consistently targeting" immigrant businesses.

Revelations that 90% of the defendants in Feeding Our Future and related Medicaid fraud have Somali origin have been met with silence and defensiveness. Our leaders are right to stand up to the unconstitutional actions of the Trump administration and scoff at the right-wing tourists knocking on our doors, but they should also be urging — even if only privately — our religious, cultural and business leaders to spread the word that our community's reputation is suffering from the actions of a few and in need of repair. That begins by delivering honest work for honest pay.

We're hardly the first group of immigrants to go through this — there's an entire genre of American cinema about the Italian mob, after all — but the sooner we get it fixed, the sooner we can get back to what we all came here for: the American Dream.

**Disclosure: Magan resigned from the Office of the Minnesota Attorney General to run against Osman for Minneapolis City Council in 2023.*