



RESEARCH REPORT

Examining Afghan Evacuees' Resettlement

Insights and Lessons for Future Humanitarian Populations

Diana Guelespe
URBAN INSTITUTE

Hamutal Bernstein
URBAN INSTITUTE

Jessica Darrow
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Soumita Bose
URBAN INSTITUTE

Shruti Nayak
URBAN INSTITUTE

Danielle Kwon
URBAN INSTITUTE

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ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit research organization that provides data and evidence to help advance upward mobility and equity. We are a trusted source for changemakers who seek to strengthen decisionmaking, create inclusive economic growth, and improve the well-being of families and communities. For more than 50 years, Urban has delivered facts that inspire solutions—and this remains our charge today.

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Cover Image: Sacramento, United States of America—August 17, 2022: Ali Zafar Mehran, 36, and his wife Karima Mehran, 31, along with their daughter Sutooda Mehran, 6, and newborn Serena, 1 month old, are Afghan refugees who have resettled in Sacramento, California, Wednesday, August 17, 2022. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Mehran family found themselves building a new life, unable to afford much, sometimes salvaging and refurbishing items that others throw out in the trash. He has to find work to address burgeoning living expenses and has started working delivering food and cleaning a local liquor store. Ali Zafar Mehran has a master's degree in finance was a budget advisor working alongside Americans in a program supporting the justice sector. He has a Special Immigrant Visa but is awaiting to hear back about the status of his U.S. green card application, as he was in the middle of the interview process before the family's chaotic exodus from Afghanistan. For now, he is focused overcoming financial challenges, finding stability for his family and hopes that he finds a better paying job. (Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images).

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Executive Summary

The abrupt and traumatic evacuation of more than 80,000 Afghans to the US in the fall of 2021 coincided with a global pandemic and a worsening US housing crisis. The US was also experiencing a weakened resettlement infrastructure due to historically low refugee admissions levels in previous years, which was in the process of expanding and transitioning under a new administration. Afghan evacuees were caught in the middle of this policy shift. Their two-year temporary immigration status, known as humanitarian parole, and challenges with housing, employment, and the immigration system, among other issues, have demonstrated the need to examine existing resources and policies to address ongoing services for Afghan arrivals and other populations that may come to the US under similar circumstances.

The Urban Institute conducted a multifaceted study to understand how Afghan evacuees were faring one and a half years after their arrival and how the broader community and resettlement field has responded to their complex needs. The experiences of Afghan evacuees and the challenges and successes associated with the resettlement community's response offer a critical opportunity to generate insights for policymakers and other stakeholders on how to assist this population in the near term and better prepare to welcome future arrivals. The study team conducted in-person interviews with Afghan evacuees and virtual interviews with a broad range of community stakeholders across three sites: Chicago, Illinois; northern Virginia; and San Antonio, Texas. Community stakeholders included resettlement agency staff, community-based organization staff, school administrators, employers, medical professionals, sponsors, landlords, legal providers, faith leaders, veterans, local government staff, and volunteers. This executive summary provides an overview of the key findings and lessons learned.

Among interviews with Afghan evacuees, we found the following:

- Frequent relocations due to temporary housing placements, poor housing conditions, lack of affordable housing options, and a desire to live closer to family, friends, and an Afghan community delayed evacuees' ability to establish themselves in their communities sooner.
- Humanitarian parole permeated several aspects of evacuees' lives and negatively impacted their ability to secure stable employment. The main challenge was the long delay in receiving resolutions to their asylum cases and work authorization cards. Their immigration status also

impacted their mental health because of the lack of clarity on when they would be reunited with family members they had been separated from.

- Most men and women reported feeling stressed, depressed, and in a state of poor mental health. They primarily attributed this to being separated from their children and family members left behind in Afghanistan and other countries. Men reported employment as an additional stressor, and women reported being homesick and lonely. Both men and women expressed frustration with the US health care system and the long delays to receive medical care.
- Most women expressed wanting more opportunities to learn or improve their English, get a driver's license, meet other Afghan women to exchange knowledge or skills with them, and get jobs once their children were school age. The availability and cost of child care options and transportation were challenges.
- Most men and women who worked said their jobs provided adequate income to cover basic expenses, but they could not save money for the future. Several of the men reported working second jobs with ride-sharing companies to earn extra income. Several who had children in the US also reported difficulty in affording leisure activities with their children.
- Overall, most evacuees reported contentment with their lives at the time of their interviews. They expressed gratitude for the peace, security, opportunities, and freedoms they have in the US but also recognized the hardships of life in the US.

Among interviewees with community stakeholders, we found the following:

- The Afghan community at these three sites volunteered and contributed a large amount of time and resources and were crucial in aiding resettlement efforts. The main challenge encountered in their efforts was a lack of access to government funding to support evacuees. Stakeholders suggested actively involving the Afghan community and leaders during funding and programmatic planning discussions.
- The main challenges reported by community stakeholders in the early phase of evacuees' arrival included insufficient and restricted funding and limited staff capacity to address urgent and ongoing needs. Significant language gaps impeded their work as they sought to support large numbers of arrivals, as they contended with bureaucratic red tape, staff burnout, and COVID-19 health protocols.

- Stakeholders identified key gaps in services for the evacuees, including a lack of affordable housing and housing discrimination, direct cash supports, mental health services, legal services, recertification processes for professionals, accessible English language classes, as well as longer-term services.
- To support response efforts, stakeholders reported drawing on partnership between resettlement agencies and a wide range of other stakeholder organizations, networks connecting stakeholders to coordinate with each other, and a variety of government funding resources.
- Best practices identified by stakeholders included empowering evacuees and other Afghan community members to act as connectors as they resettled in the US, collaborating with government and organizations to address urgent needs and remove or expedite bureaucratic barriers, bridging the cultural and informational gap between evacuees and the broader community, and fostering social connections with members of the broader local community and other Afghan evacuees.
- Key recommendations from stakeholder and evacuee interviewees to help meet the ongoing needs of Afghans include (1) passing the Afghan Adjustment Act, (2) quickly reunifying family members, (3) supporting access to mental health services for an extended period and with linguistically and culturally responsive staff, and (4) increasing accessibility of education and employment services.
- Recommendations for measures that would be helpful for future humanitarian populations include (1) engaging community leaders, groups and stakeholders that are culturally aligned prior to the arrival and throughout the extended resettlement process, (2) providing extended and ongoing training and orientations for community stakeholders and new arrivals, (3) ensuring agencies, organizations, and groups working with the new arrivals have trained staff who speak their native language, and (4) increasing communication and collaboration across community stakeholder groups.

Since the arrival of Afghan evacuees, several other groups have been provided humanitarian parole, including over 176,000 Ukrainians through the Uniting for Ukraine program and 340,000 Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelans with US sponsors;¹ in addition, up to 529,250 migrants can be processed annually through the new US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) One app and granted parole² as they navigate the immigration system. The US now has over a million³ individuals living under humanitarian parole, and although they may have distinct experiences from Afghan evacuees, including

eligibility for government-funded refugee resettlement services,⁴ they may confront similar challenges navigating the immigration system, securing stable employment and housing and seeking to be reunited with family members. Establishing a framework of policies for these circumstances that better prepare the US government, resettlement agencies, and other groups to meet the needs of people more cohesively during humanitarian crises can lead to improved experiences for all involved and reduce the pressure on existing systems and institutions.

Examining Afghan Evacuees’ Resettlement: Insights and Lessons for Future Humanitarian Populations

In this report, we examine the experiences of 36 Afghan evacuees and how they fared a year and a half after arriving to the US, and how the broader community and resettlement infrastructure in three study sites—Chicago, northern Virginia, and San Antonio—responded to their complex needs. This report begins with background on the context of Afghan evacuees’ arrival to the US, the state of refugee resettlement infrastructure at the time of their arrival, evacuees’ immigration status, and demographic diversity. Then, the report provides insights from interviews with Afghan evacuees and community stakeholders, including Afghan diaspora leaders. The report concludes with lessons that can inform a framework of proactive policies that better prepare the US government, resettlement agencies, and other groups to meet the needs of people more cohesively during humanitarian crises.

Background

As the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in summer 2021 and entered Kabul, US military forces ended their 20-year military presence and began a large-scale evacuation of more than 80,000 fleeing Afghans, known as Operation Allies Refuge (OAR). Although OAR was intended to relocate Afghan nationals and family members eligible for special immigrant visas (SIVs), Afghans still in the SIV determination process and other targets of the new Taliban government, such as human rights activists, journalists, and others who assisted the US mission, were also included (US Department of State 2023).⁵ Most evacuees entered the US under humanitarian parole, a two-year temporary authorization to enter and work in the US without a pathway to lawful permanent residence status.⁶ Afghan evacuees arrived in the US amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, a worsening housing crisis, and a refugee resettlement field operating under constrained capacity.

Arrival to the US

As several reports have noted, the evacuation of Afghans was abrupt—executed in only 17 days⁷—and chaotic, with crowds of people surrounding the Kabul airport, risking their lives, vulnerable to being targeted by the Taliban, and some even enduring the suicide attack⁸ on August 26, 2021.

On August 29, 2021, President Biden directed the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to lead and coordinate efforts across the federal government to assist Afghans through Operation Allies Welcome (OAW),⁹ a multiphase effort¹⁰ that would last through September 2022.¹¹ After being evacuated by the US military, most Afghans were taken to other nations where they were screened and vetted before being flown to “safe havens,” or military bases, in the US.¹² They stayed at the “safe havens” for weeks or months¹³ before being provided resettlement services in their new communities across the US. Their initial needs were supported through the Afghan Placement Assistance (APA) program, modeled after the Reception & Placement services normally provided to resettled refugees and implemented through nine refugee resettlement agencies¹⁴ and their network of affiliates.¹⁵ Although their eligibility for Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) services was initially unclear at the time of the evacuation,¹⁶ Afghan parolees were made eligible for longer-term programs funded by ORR, such as Matching Grant, Preferred Communities, Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA), Refugee Social Services (RSS), and federal safety net programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).¹⁷ Like other refugees resettled to the US, Afghans were assigned to a refugee resettlement agency and a specific local community, where they received housing and assistance to start their new lives, which included finding employment, being enrolled in safety net programs and other services, and enrolling children in school. Afghans were resettled in nearly all states, with the largest numbers in California, Texas, and Virginia.¹⁸ Throughout this initial process, resettlement agencies had little time to prepare—a matter of weeks—to provide these services to thousands of Afghan arrivals.

State of Resettlement Infrastructure

Afghan evacuees arrived at a time when the US Refugee Admissions Program, resettlement agencies, and their network of affiliates, were at reduced capacity following a dramatic shift in policy by the Trump administration, which had drastically reduced refugee admissions levels to historic lows compared with prior years (Darrow and Howsam Scholl 2020). This shift led to the closure and suspension of nearly a hundred resettlement programs and offices across the country.¹⁹ Although the Biden administration was in the process of rebuilding the resettlement infrastructure, it was

overwhelmed by the complex needs of the large number of arrivals, and many evacuees experienced significant delays in being connected to services. Most were placed in temporary housing situations, such as Airbnb and hotel rooms, until permanent housing could be secured. The challenge of finding housing was significant given the unaffordability of housing and the greater housing crisis, the number of arrivals, and the large size of many families. Many experienced significant physical and mental health challenges.²⁰ Individuals and families fled from a war-stricken country and escaped on short time frames with limited preparation. They suffered from the trauma of their experiences in Afghanistan, of their escape, and of their abrupt arrival and resettlement in an unfamiliar country. Many also had family members who were left behind in Afghanistan whose future was uncertain and faced the threat of persecution from Taliban authorities, particularly those who had worked with the US military.²¹

Many organizations and individuals in communities stepped in to volunteer and provide additional help to government-funded efforts. This included leaders in the established Afghan community, veterans' organizations, and faith groups, among other community stakeholders who provided a variety of supports, including donating food, home goods, and furniture; providing transportation; and hosting and supporting families. Donations and funding at the local and national level supplemented government programming, including new organizations like Welcome.US.²² The US government also launched its first private sponsorship program at the time of the Afghans' arrivals,²³ made up of "sponsor circles" hosting a relatively small number of evacuees.²⁴

Immigration Status

As previously stated, most evacuees were granted humanitarian parole. Although parolees could apply for work authorization and were given access to refugee resettlement services and safety net programs, they do not have permanent resident status. In several past situations when the US government granted large-scale parole for humanitarian emergencies, such as for Cubans or Vietnamese evacuees, parolees have been granted lawful permanent residence status.²⁵ The Afghan Adjustment Act, however, which would grant lawful permanent residence to Afghan parolees, was introduced in Congress in 2022 and 2023 but has not been passed as of December 2023. That leaves evacuees in the position of navigating the complex US immigration system to apply for permanent resident status through the asylum process or other pathways.

A small share of evacuees arrived as SIVs, which are limited to people who worked for the US military in Afghanistan for at least one year and their immediate family members. Many evacuees have applied for SIV or asylum, which both lead to permanent resident status. People can apply for asylum if

they are being persecuted or have a fear of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (USCIS 2023). These application processes are laborious²⁶ and require significant time as an already overloaded immigration processing system²⁷ struggles to accommodate additional applications. Although the government committed to expediting asylum processing for Afghan applicants and adjudicating them within 150 days, delays have been a persistent challenge. A class action lawsuit over the delays was settled in fall 2023, with the government agreeing to process pending asylum applications within months.²⁸

The two-year parole authorization would have ended for many in summer and fall of 2023. A reparole process²⁹ was launched in summer 2023 to extend parole for the tens of thousands of Afghans waiting for their immigration applications to be processed, and for those who have not yet filed for any change to their liminal status. Due to the slow processing of asylum applications and late reparole announcement, many evacuees have also applied for temporary protected status (TPS), which is a temporary status granted on a time-limited country basis, based on assessment of country conditions; TPS allows recipients to remain in the US and apply for work authorization for the duration of the TPS period. In 2022, the DHS designated Afghanistan for TPS and in summer 2023 extended and redesignated it.³⁰ Although this provided some near-term relief, its late announcement contributed to the ongoing uncertainty experienced by many evacuees since their arrival.

Afghan Diversity

Although this study was focused on interviews with Afghan evacuees who arrived between August 1 through December 31, 2021, and were airlifted out of the country, many more Afghans continued to arrive in the weeks and months that followed and sought services at resettlement agencies and community-based organizations. For example, some Afghans arrived with the assistance of US veterans' groups³¹ and others made their way to countries like Brazil and journeyed to the US-Mexico border.³² Their experiences are equally important, but this study focused on the experiences of Afghan evacuees who were airlifted and arrived in 2021.

The Afghan evacuee population is diverse, with varying needs based on their immigration status, English language fluency, educational attainment and literacy rate, gender, and background in urban or rural settings. The challenges and opportunities encountered by evacuees were often based on one or several of these demographic factors, which strongly shaped the process of establishing their lives in their new communities.

SIVs were distinct from parolees due to their prior experience working alongside the US military or Americans. They spoke English well, had knowledge of US culture, were literate, and knew some Americans they had served with upon their arrival. SIVs had a secure pathway to permanent resident status, and most had received a green card granting them lawful permanent residency by the time of our interviews. They were prepared to come to the US, whereas many Afghan parolees had little to no English language fluency or formal education. As described above, parolees' authorization in the US had a two-year expiration date, raising concerns for their stability and well-being.

Another distinction was whether evacuees came from Kabul or rural areas. Evacuees from the Kabul area tended to have higher levels of education and English fluency, professional work experience, including among women, and were ready to start working immediately after arrival in the US. Evacuees from rural areas typically had lower or no formal education and had big families where wives had no formal education or English language fluency and were mainly focused on raising their children and carrying out family duties. Native Dari speakers tended to come from the city and Pashto speakers from rural areas. Some Pashto speakers could speak Dari, but not all Dari speakers could speak Pashto.

Among the group of evacuees with higher educational attainment, individuals described professions in Afghanistan, such as lawyers, doctors, engineers, journalists, civil rights activists, teachers, pilots, and government and military leaders. Their level of education, work experience, and English fluency often facilitated their access to good jobs that paid above minimum wage. They also had a better understanding of the legal system and how to work with attorneys on their immigration cases.

Evacuees who had little or no formal education or low levels of literacy or English fluency tended to face the most challenges and be in crisis situations. Upon arriving in the US, they worked in low-wage jobs, making it difficult to sustain their families and cover basic expenses. They also could not make enough money to establish credit and move to better housing. Women especially faced barriers due to their limited literacy, English language fluency, and lack of professional work experience. The lower-educated population had the least understanding of their immigration status in the US and other systems that affected their daily lives.

Methodology

To examine the experiences of Afghan evacuees and the community stakeholders that assisted them, we conducted data collection in phases and integrated a community-engaged approach.

Community-Engaged Approach

This project sought to center refugee and Afghan voices to foster community empowerment and develop culturally relevant and sensitive research. This included the following:

- **Community advisory board.** We convened an advisory board of nine individuals, the majority of whom were members of the Afghan community, who represented diverse areas of refugee resettlement expertise and provided insights for the project based on their knowledge and lived experiences. They participated in quarterly meetings to advise on the project design and data-collection protocols, provide feedback on preliminary findings, and suggest formats and key audiences for communication efforts. In addition, board members participated in ad hoc meetings to discuss and test interview protocols, identify field interviewers, and review accuracy of translated materials. Each advisory board member was provided with a stipend to recognize the value of their contributions and unique expertise.
- **Community partners and site selection.** We partnered with two resettlement agencies and one community-based organization across three sites to support recruitment of interview participants: Global Refuge (formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) in northern Virginia, RefugeeOne in Chicago, and Culturingua in San Antonio. Each community partner received a stipend to recognize their time and collaboration efforts. These sites were selected because they reflected varying characteristics that could provide unique insights. Northern Virginia, a suburban setting, was one of the largest initial receivers of evacuees, had an established Afghan community prior to evacuees' arrival, and was characterized as being a mixed political setting with some support of immigrants and refugees. Chicago, an urban setting, received a large number of evacuees, had a long history of resettlement and network of resettlement providers, with a strong level of local and state support for the Afghan evacuees. San Antonio, a mixed urban-suburban setting, received many evacuees, who were largely Pashto-speaking and from rural Afghan communities, and this was a site of secondary migration for Afghans moving from initial resettlement states. Although San Antonio had strong local government welcome efforts, the state's governmental leadership has taken many exclusionary measures against immigrants.
- **Community listening session.** A virtual community listening session was convened in November 2023. The purpose of the session was to discuss our study findings with our partners and people working on the ground and gain insights about the results and what those results might mean for the Afghan community and people who provide services to them.

Representatives from our community partners were present, as well as individuals from other community-based organizations in the three study sites.

Multiphase Data Collection

Data collection consisted of a combination of participant observation at two sites, Chicago and northern Virginia, where research team members were based, and interviews with community stakeholders and Afghan evacuees across all three study sites.

- **Participant observation.** Members of the research team observed various activities for the Afghan community to understand the organizational and structural settings and contexts in which evacuees received services and support. Research team members attended events between March and June of 2023, such as a festival celebrating refugees, an international women's day event, and job and back-to-school fairs, and visited Afghan restaurants, grocery stores, and community partner sites.
- **Interviews with community stakeholders.** Between April and June of 2023, we conducted 51 60-minute virtual interviews with 55 community stakeholders. They included resettlement agency staff, community-based organization staff, school administrators, employers, medical professionals, sponsors, landlords, legal providers, faith leaders, veterans, local government staff, and volunteers. Some of the community stakeholders were also Afghan community leaders. See table 1. Semistructured interviews included questions to better understand the constraints and opportunities community stakeholder experienced since the arrival of Afghan evacuees in their communities. Interviewees were identified in two phases. First, we identified stakeholder categories to ensure that we had representation from the wide range of groups mentioned above that played a role in assistance efforts. Then, we engaged in snowball sampling with some interviewees suggested by our community partners and others suggested by interviewees. All nongovernmental participants were provided a gift card for their time and participation.

TABLE 1

Number of Stakeholders Interviews by Interviewee Type and Location

| | Chicago | Northern Virginia | San Antonio | Total |
|---------------------------|-----------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Resettlement agency staff | 2 | 4 | 3 | 9 |
| Afghan community leaders | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| Other stakeholders | 13 | 10 | 12 | 35 |
| Total | 16 | 18 | 17 | 51 |

Source: Urban Institute community stakeholder interviews April through June 2023.

- Interviews with Afghan evacuees.** Between June and August 2023, field interviewers conducted 36 in-person 90-minute interviews, with 12 at each site divided evenly between women and men. We contracted a team of six Afghan field interviewers who were fluent in Dari, Pashto, and English to screen participants and conduct the interviews. Each site had a man and woman locally based field interviewer; men led interviews with male interviewees, and women led interviews with female interviewees. The group of interviewers included three who were evacuees themselves, and three Afghans who had been living in the US for a longer period. The field interviewers completed human subjects training and additional study-specific training covering the interview protocol, confidentiality, and data security. Once of the project's principal investigators met regularly with field interviewers and was available throughout their interviews to answer any questions and debrief.

Interviews took place largely in interviewees' homes, in addition to private meeting rooms in local libraries. Two female interviewees were accompanied by male family members during their interviews; for these, additional steps were taken to inform interviewees about risks to confidentiality. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and translated into English for analysis by the research team.

All interviewees had arrived as evacuees between August 1 and December 31, 2021, and were over 18 years of age. They had diverse characteristics (see table 2). Some arrived as SIVs and the majority as humanitarian parolees. Most interviewees in Chicago and northern Virginia preferred to have the interviews in Dari, and most in San Antonio were conducted in Pashto. Interviewees ranged in their marital and parental status and level of education. They were recruited through flyers disseminated by our community partners and field interviewers and by word of mouth.

We took measures to ensure the sample of Afghan evacuee interview participants were as representative as possible. The sample reflects a variety of demographic characteristics,

including hard-to-reach groups, such as women, Pashto speakers, and people with no formal education. But certain limitations existed. The sample represents people who felt comfortable participating in a research study and who most likely had connections or interactions with organizations, faith groups, volunteers, or Afghan community leaders disseminating the recruitment efforts. The study is less representative of Afghan evacuees living in rural settings and isolated from an established Afghan community, those who preferred not to be recorded, and those who have not received assistance from community organizations or volunteers.

TABLE 2
Characteristics of Afghan Evacuees Interviewed by Location

| | Chicago | Northern Virginia | San Antonio |
|--------------------------------------|---------|-------------------|-------------|
| Men | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Women | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Marital status | | | |
| <i>Single</i> | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Married</i> | 10 | 10 | 11 |
| <i>Married with children</i> | 9 | 10 | 8 |
| Immigration status at arrival | | | |
| <i>Humanitarian parole</i> | 12 | 6 | 12 |
| <i>SIV</i> | 0 | 6 | 0 |
| Native language | | | |
| <i>Dari</i> | 12 | 11 | 3 |
| <i>Pashto</i> | 0 | 1 | 9 |
| Educational level | | | |
| <i>College degree</i> | 4 | 6 | 4 |
| <i>Some college</i> | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| <i>High school</i> | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| <i>Primary school</i> | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| <i>No formal education</i> | 1 | 1 | 6 |

Source: Urban Institute Afghan evacuee interviews June through August 2023

Notes: Self-reported data from interview participants.

Evacuee Experiences on Adapting to Life in the US

We will first share insights from the evacuee interviewees before moving to insights from the stakeholders. Our findings from interviews with evacuees focused on their frequent relocations, impact of the humanitarian parole and family separation on their mental health and employment, and opportunities sought by Afghan women as they settle in their communities.

For someone like me—who lived 38 to 39 years in a different country—it is challenging to adapt to life here, especially because I used to live with my extended family members, and we saw each other most of the time. But now, I am away from them. This affects me mentally and emotionally, although I rarely find time to think about them because of the pressure of work. However, it makes me happy that I can help them financially, which partly relieves my emotional pains.

—Afghan man, northern Virginia

All interviewees arrived between August 1 and December 31 of 2021, were over 18 years old, and had been in the country one and a half years when they were interviewed for this study. As previously mentioned, the Afghan evacuees who arrived in the US had diverse backgrounds, and the majority received humanitarian parole upon arrival. Some were at different phases of the SIV process when they were evacuated and continued that process after arriving in the US. Their immigration status is one of the main factors impacting their experience and establishment in the US.

The majority of the 36 evacuees interviewed for this study received humanitarian parole when they entered. Through these interviews they shared what their life was like in Afghanistan prior to the evacuation and their experiences with several aspects of their life in the US, such as their journey and arrival to the US, interactions with resettlement agency services, contact with the established Afghan community, housing and neighborhood, education, parenting, the immigration system, physical and emotional health, social inclusion and belonging, future plans, and overall feelings about life in the US.

The interviews first explored what life was like in Afghanistan prior to coming to the US. Evacuees across all sites, men and women, reported that prior to the Taliban gaining control of Afghanistan in 2021 they had a good life. Men reported having good jobs that sustained several members of their immediate and extended family members who lived in the same household. Women in Kabul reported having good jobs, were actively pursuing their education, or a combination of the two, working part time and studying part time. Women from the rural areas reported having a comfortable life due to their husbands' income. Men worked primarily in the Afghanistan military or government positions, and others also worked or were contracted by the US government or allied forces. A few men worked at a university. Women who worked tended to be in teaching, nongovernmental organization (NGO), and midwife positions. The majority reported leaving family members behind, including children, parents, siblings, and extended members, such as in-laws, nieces, and nephews who may have also lived in the same household. Many reported witnessing or being victims of violence at the time of their departure, and having family members who were persecuted, missing, or killed by the Taliban.

Below are the five main findings from our interviews with the evacuees, touching on issues that range from housing to employment, family separation, physical and mental health, and parole experiences, among other topics. We identify where issues appeared to vary across study sites and include quotes from both men and women as much as possible.

Housing Issues and Relocations Delay Resettlement

Most interviewed evacuees reported a series of moves throughout their journey to the US and after arriving. Although they were all evacuated from Afghanistan, not all were immediately brought to the US. Most were taken to other countries, such as Qatar, Germany, or Italy, sometimes for several days or several weeks, prior to arriving to the US. Once in the US, most were brought to US military bases or “safe havens” across the country where they waited for several weeks and months before being taken to the resettlement location. Some reported spending time at more than one safe haven. Once in their resettlement city, most were temporarily housed in hotels for weeks or months before arriving at their permanent housing location chosen by the resettlement agency. In addition, the majority reported leaving their first home due to poor housing conditions and found alternate housing through friends or decided to relocate to a different city, closer to family, friends, job opportunities, and Afghan communities. Other factors that led to their frequent moves related to high rent costs or increases in rent.

The previous house was in poor condition with pests, and the landlord treated us poorly. The oven did not work for two months and the fridge was broken. When I brought these issues to the landlord's attention, he did not care. Additionally, they raised the rent on us because we were a large family.... One of my Afghan friends told me about a person renting a two-bedroom unit.... I have been living in this apartment for two months now and it is a good clean place (Afghan man, Chicago).

Two of my husband's brothers were in San Antonio, Texas. They advised us to come here and live together. Traditionally, Afghans prefer to live together with their family and cannot live apart.... We closed our case with [the agency] and arrived in San Antonio in February 2022 (Afghan woman, San Antonio).

The frequent moves between safe havens and temporary and permanent housing meant that most of the evacuees were still in the process of getting established in their communities even though they had been in the country for two years at the time they were interviewed. With each relocation, they had to update immigration paperwork, reenroll their children in school, and search for new job opportunities, further delaying their ability to become permanently established in a community.

Impact of Ongoing Parole on Employment

All evacuees reported they were informed at the military bases to apply for asylum within one year, if they were parolees, or SIV, if they met the criteria. The majority reported receiving the assistance of community-based organizations, resettlement agencies, friends, and legal service providers in completing the forms. Of the 36 interviewees, seven had received lawful permanent resident status, or a green card, at the time of their interviews. Six of the seven who reported having received their green cards were SIVs who had submitted a case prior to their evacuation or soon after arriving.

The evacuees reported two main issues as parolees. The first was the long wait for receiving a resolution to their cases, be it asylum or SIV, and the second was delayed work authorization cards. They had been told that a resolution to their case would be determined within 150 days. The delay was of great concern and caused uncertainty about their future in the US. One of the frequently reported reasons for wanting a green card is so that they could reunite with their family members and bring them to the US.

I currently have a humanitarian parole case and have already applied for asylum six months ago. I was told that after five months, I would receive a notice in the mail, but it has been more than six months now, and I have not received it yet. I am looking forward to receiving it soon so that I can bring my family here.

—Afghan woman, Chicago

Delays also caused issues with finding stable work, as work authorization cards had the same expiration as their parole. The majority commuted to work by car, and several had second jobs with ride-sharing companies. Not having a valid work authorization meant that their employment in any position could be terminated, and several expressed this fear. None of the participants reported they had been terminated, but stakeholders interviewed did report assisting evacuees who had been terminated and whose employers had requested official documentation of their parole extension. This also impacted their ability to pursue other opportunities, such as opening a business, applying for government positions, and enlisting in the US military.

Despite my efforts and securing the necessary qualifications, my application to open a 7-11 franchise was denied due to my immigration status as a refugee. To be able to run a franchise, I had to have permanent resident status (Afghan man, northern Virginia).

We don't know when we will receive our [green] cards...I wasn't able to take driving lessons without a valid [green] card. This situation makes daily life more challenging. There are places that require a green card and not having one can limit job opportunities. So, while our daily life is generally manageable, not having green cards does have negative effects on our daily routines and opportunities (Afghan woman, San Antonio).

Family Reunification and Other Stressors Affect Mental Health

Most evacuees interviewed reported they were in good physical health, but their mental health had been suffering. When they stated they were in good physical health, several contrasted it to their early arrival and time on the military bases when their nutrition was poor, they lacked sufficient sleep, and they were severely depressed and stressed due to their departure and conditions at the base. Most men and women said they still felt stressed and depressed but for different reasons.

One of the main sources of depression expressed by both men and women was being separated from family members. Of the 36 evacuees interviewed, 8 mentioned they had left children behind and 32 mentioned they left family members behind. Men and women whose children and immediate and extended family members were still in Afghanistan expressed this as a primary challenge.

My most significant challenge is being away from my family and grappling with the sense of loneliness, which is not easy. You yearn to be close to your children and they need you too. Primarily, as parents, it is our duty to raise our children in the best way possible and not having them with me has been a major and unpleasant challenge. It feels like time is passing without a clear purpose, which is disheartening for me.

—Afghan man, northern Virginia

Most men who were stressed also stated they had anxiety due to their employment. Their fears ranged from losing their jobs to the constant need to work. Most women expressed stress and anxiety about being in their new homes, feeling homesick and lonely.

I am doing well physically but not mentally. I am anxious and concerned about what would happen if I lost my job. Not only me but all Afghans here face the same anxieties (Afghan man, northern Virginia).

When my husband goes to work, whether during the day or night, and I stay at home alone since we don't have children, I often feel very lonely. I wish I had close family members like my father, mother, or sister around so that I could visit and talk with them. That would be wonderful. Unfortunately, I can't do that now, and the fact that I don't see or interact with anybody negatively affects my emotional well-being.... I've recently met a few Afghan neighbors and we've started visiting each other, which has improved things (Afghan woman, San Antonio).

Some men and women reported they often felt sadness when they thought about their evacuation experience, their time waiting outside of the Kabul airport, spending several hours on a plane and not being allowed to bring anything with them, and their time at the military bases. Several described memories of a violent incident they experienced, such as the suicide bomber at the Kabul airport, or the Taliban beating or killing a family member prior to the evacuation.

Aside from their mental health challenges, many reported frustrating experiences with the US health care system. The majority reported having medical insurance—mostly Medicaid—while a few had private insurance through an employer, and a few did not have any because of their relocations. They

reported interpretation at hospitals and clinics was good, with an interpreter almost always being available, mostly by phone. Their major concern with the health care system was that insurance did not cover certain procedures such as dental care or MRIs, and that specialists needed a referral.

I have experienced lower back problems after giving birth via cesarean section. It has been bothering me, and I want to undergo an MRI, which is approximately \$4,000. They suggested I first try physical therapy, and if that doesn't help, then they would consider performing the MRI. This situation has been challenging for us. In our home country, the health care system was different, and you could directly go to the doctors without such hurdles. The process of seeing doctors and dealing with medical issues here is much more difficult than what we experienced in Afghanistan (Afghan woman, Chicago).

They also overwhelmingly reported frustration with the months-long wait to see a doctor when setting an appointment and frequently compared it with the Afghanistan health system, where one can see a doctor the same day. Although most women said they preferred to see a female doctor, many also said the gender did not matter or noted that for gynecology appointments, it was preferred. Some women in northern Virginia and San Antonio described longer waiting periods if you preferred to see a woman doctor and said it was not worth it to wait.

As a Muslim woman, I always prefer to be visited by a female doctor, but I would not insist on it where a female doctor is not immensely available, especially in this cultural environment where we have different social conventions than those practiced in Afghanistan. However, female doctors were available every time I visited a medical care center (Afghan woman, northern Virginia).

Afghan Women Seek Opportunities

Among the women interviewed, the majority expressed wanting more opportunities to learn or improve their English, get a driver's license, meet other Afghan women to exchange knowledge or skills with them, and get jobs once their children were school age.

Most women reported attending English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, either in person or online, for a short period. The classes were free and provided by a community college, a resettlement agency, or a faith group. Several reasons explained why men and women did not continue attending ESL classes. Some were told they could only attend free ESL classes for a certain number of hours due to the demand of other refugees also needing classes. All evacuees who attended online courses reported that it was not effective and preferred to be taught in person. Evacuees who knew no English said being taught by people who do not speak Dari or Pashto was challenging as students could not understand the

meaning of words. Women across sites reported they needed child care to attend or continue attending classes.

I want to study because English is very important for everyone here...but I can only do that when my children get older and can differentiate between good and bad. I will then be able to focus on learning English. My older children are telling me, "If you go to study English, who will take care of the younger children?" If I take my children to a babysitter, it will cost me \$300 monthly so I can go and study (Afghan woman, San Antonio).

Women in northern Virginia and San Antonio also stated that the distance to the ESL classes was too far or required a long commute on public transportation. Women also expressed interest in driving classes to obtain a license so that they could get to their classes and attend to the household more easily. Women with higher levels of education expressed interest in improving their English speaking and writing ability so they could continue in professions they had in Afghanistan, such as a nurse, teacher, or midwife.

Someone came and told us, "You can come and study." However, the location was quite far and personally, I am unable to drive. Unfortunately, this is a significant need for us. But there were no driving classes available where we study. All the women there expressed that our primary need is to learn how to drive before anything else.

—Afghan woman, San Antonio

Women in northern Virginia and San Antonio reported wanting more opportunities to socialize and teach each other skills and visit each other's homes. They noted practical reasons for gathering such as exchanging information but also to promote their well-being. Several described the need and benefits of gathering with distant Afghan friends and relatives or new neighbors.

In our living area, there are three towers, and many residents are Afghans.... Some have been living here for 10 years, while others arrived around the same time as us.... On Sundays, we plan gatherings where families and men come together separately. We organize these programs to help alleviate depression among women who may be experiencing emotional distress. We each bring food and tea to share and have a good time together (Afghan woman, northern Virginia).

I just interact with a woman whom I love to spend time and share with her everything I cook.... I am happy to interact with her because there are no Afghan families in our neighborhood.... My daughter helps me with interpretation whenever I see that woman.... I want to connect with

someone with whom I can freely express my feelings and problems. If I stay at home and have nothing to do, I will get mental problems (Afghan woman, San Antonio).

One notable difference with men and women evacuees in Chicago was that many reported socializing and seeking assistance and attending programs from a variety sources: friends, family, resettlement agencies, ethnic community-based organizations³³ and groups, and volunteers.

I felt immense happiness and comfort in connecting with the Muslim organization. They understood our language and treated us with the most professionalism (Afghan man, Chicago).

There were three to four organizations that provided assistance.... Some helped us with furniture and household items for our new home, some supported my eldest son's education and provided guidance for university, and others assisted with getting driving licenses, verification of my educational degree, as well as community orientation (Afghan woman, Chicago).

A woman who was disabled reflected on volunteers who were from the Hazara community, an ethnic group of Afghanistan, that visited and assisted her upon arriving to Chicago.

Initially, the Afghan Hazara community took on the responsibility until my process for acquiring a personal caregiver was completed with the government. The Hazara community would visit and volunteer to assist with my personal care until a home care aide was assigned to me through the government. [They] played a significant role in this aspect. I am very grateful to them (Afghan women, Chicago).

Newfound Opportunities, Security, Freedoms, and Hardships

Overall, with some distance from their arrival, most evacuees reported they are “content” with their current lives. They expressed gratitude for the peace, security, opportunities, and freedoms they have in the US but also recognized the hardships of life in the US.

All respondents except two reported feeling content and comfortable with their lives in the US. They attribute this primarily to living in a safe and peaceful environment where they do not have to worry about their security or the country being at war. They also expressed happiness at pursuing opportunities for education for themselves and their children and contrasted this with the current situation in Afghanistan where many schools and colleges are closed or do not allow women and girls to study. Several reported being treated respectfully, not being discriminated against, and being welcomed.

Living in the US offers a modern and comfortable life, providing basic necessities that women lack in Afghanistan. Here, as human being, you have all the rights. Life is busy and you need to work tirelessly (Afghan woman, Chicago).

Naturally there are challenges, but overall we are satisfied with living in this society. We have ample learning opportunities through travel and encounters with diverse people, which is informative for us. We find satisfaction in having the freedom to express ourselves without fear of threats from groups like the Taliban or other terrorist organizations. We live in safety and work toward our goals in mind (Afghan man, northern Virginia).

Although evacuees expressed being content, they also stated that they would be happier and life would be better if they could bring their families to the US. As mentioned previously, being separated from their immediate and extended family members was a source of distress for them. Despite being separated, many make plans with their family in mind, such as continuing their studies and helping children pursue their education when they arrive, buying a house and car, and opening a business.

I am content and hopeful about my future here, aspiring to have a business and a home within my capacity once my family arrives.

—Afghan man, northern Virginia

Most men and women who worked said their jobs provided adequate income to cover basic expenses, but they could not save any money for the future. Several of the men reported working second jobs with ride-sharing companies to earn extra income. Several who had children here also reported difficulty in affording leisure activities with their children.

In Afghanistan, if I did not work 10 days [out of] a month, there would be no issue. Working 20 days [in] a month, I would be able to cover the costs of the whole month. However, in the US, if I do not work 10 days [out of] a month, I would not be able to pay my rent or earn enough to eat (Afghan man, northern Virginia).

I want my husband to continue his education and achieve progress. His current job does not offer much room for advancement. The combination of hard labor and low pay makes it challenging to secure our future. In the US, a significant portion of our income goes back to the government [through taxes], leaving us with limited funds (Afghan woman, Chicago).

The few evacuees who reported not being content in the US referred to what they were told about life in the US before arriving, such as opportunities to obtain good jobs, have financial stability, and secure a comfortable life, which did not materialize for them. They referred to life in the US as a more

complex environment versus Afghanistan where life was simpler and used examples of not easily accessing a doctor and children not being able to play outside.

Afghan Community as a Crucial Component in Aiding Resettlement

As mentioned in the previous section, evacuees relied on the assistance of Afghan friends and family members in the US, in addition to resettlement agencies and community-based organizations, to help them settle into their new communities. To explore the role that the Afghan community played in providing support for evacuees in the aftermath of the evacuation, we spoke to established Afghan community members with a variety of professional backgrounds, including human resources, law, business, medical, and educational fields.

We wouldn't have done this without the community support. For example, the Virginia Muslim community, different Afghan communities came up.... The Afghan community and the resettlement agencies all contributed tremendously linguistically and culturally. We could not have done it because some [evacuees] spoke fluent English; some spoke not one word of English.

—Community stakeholder, northern Virginia

Evacuees shared their motivations for their involvement, actions taken to support evacuees, challenges experienced, and suggestions for sustaining their engagement. They all had had prior engagement with Afghan communities and most said that their shared experiences, such as being Afghan, having been a refugee or having family still residing in Afghanistan, motivated them to become involved in resettlement activities. Some Afghan community members reflected on the importance of having a shared cultural background with Afghan evacuees and concern that evacuees' practices and customs be respected. They also recognized the urgency and immense need as the situation unfolded.

At the time, it just felt like if Afghan Americans didn't do it, or didn't step up, then many of the more intricate, nuanced points would be potentially missed.... I think that having people who could identify with the evacuees was really important. So, from my point of view, it was just something that we had to do, I had to do (Afghan community leader, northern Virginia).

Efforts to Support Evacuees

Members of the Afghan community participated in and led extensive efforts to support evacuees. They served as an ongoing resource for evacuees by providing translation and interpretation and resolving concerns that arose in school, legal, and health care settings. In some cases, these efforts were in collaboration with government, resettlement agencies, and other groups, and at other times on a one-on-one basis.

- **Assistance at the military bases and airports.** Volunteers were the backbone in supporting early resettlement efforts, sometimes volunteering in 14-hour shifts. They helped supply food and donations, commuting between 2.5 and 10 hours roundtrip. Some provided legal orientations, and others acted as and recruited therapists, medical providers, and interpreters to staff shifts at the bases and airport.
- **Employment opportunities.** Afghan volunteers also helped evacuees find work in unique and innovative ways. In San Antonio, a volunteer established a direct partnership with an employer to hire evacuees and made arrangements to help evacuees with translations and job applications. That community member also compiled a list of employers and shared it with a local organization assisting evacuees. Another volunteer in northern Virginia created a recorded lecture series in partnership with Coursera and John Hopkins University to illustrate alternative ways to utilize international health care degrees in the US.
- **Assisting resettlement agencies.** Once evacuees began resettling in their communities, Afghan volunteers donated extensive time toward connecting evacuees with necessary services and benefits at resettlement agencies and providing monetary and in-kind donations, such as clothing, diapers, toys, and food. In San Antonio, Afghan community members stepped in to help evacuees fill out lengthy public benefits applications, and some drove evacuees to drop off their paperwork. Lawyers in northern Virginia also filed asylum applications pro bono for evacuees.
- **Health and cultural education.** Afghan community members spoke of the different ways in which they provided cultural education and health care information to Afghan evacuees. For example, one member in San Antonio shared community updates via WhatsApp, while another scheduled information sessions at his business. A member in Chicago shared that some evacuees came to the US “very scared” of the government, so they arranged meetings with the police in which kids tried on police hats and developed mutual trust with law enforcement.

[It was] amazing how the community came together and what they did. And it wasn't just Afghans. I think that the Muslim, American Muslim organizations, and communities were really, really integral in a lot of the places. They allowed [people]s to use [their] space. And just having somewhere we could use space was a big deal.

—Afghan community leader, northern Virginia

Lack of Access to Funding

As the established Afghan community assisted the evacuees, they also face several challenges. A majority expressed frustration with the level of bureaucracy or “red tape,” noting that the rigid structure of government funding and lack of partnership with community-based organizations made it extremely difficult to access funding for their efforts and provide resources to the evacuee community. Leaders in northern Virginia noted that the federal government’s reliance on the same contractors and the Afghan community’s lack of knowledge in navigating the system made it difficult for Afghan groups and organizations to receive funding. In San Antonio, the lack of government funding and resources left the community with limited infrastructure to support the large number of Afghan evacuees.

Multimillion-dollar contracts were given and are being given as we speak to those [contractors] and the community does not either have access or they can't get it or they're not familiar [with it].... We didn't know how to navigate the system, and we had hundreds of volunteers doing these things.... There was a time where the fatigue hit. We were like, we see these organizations, non-Afghans getting all kinds of grants and funding, and we were asked to continue to volunteer...so the red tape was always there—has been there—which is frustrating (Afghan community leader, northern Virginia).

In addition to lacking access to funding, Afghan community members also explained their personal difficulties in helping evacuees acclimate quickly, experiencing burnout and navigating internal divisions. Volunteers had a short window of time to familiarize Afghan evacuees with norms in the US and few resources to offset the cost of their time. This led to community members often experiencing burnout while volunteering on top of their full-time jobs. Some members in northern Virginia shared that assisting Afghan evacuees triggered their own trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, which made it difficult to compartmentalize while providing continued support.

Internal divisions within the Afghan community also made it difficult to provide support and come together as a unified voice. At least one community member in each site described a lack of cohesion

that made it difficult to support Afghan evacuees. In Chicago and San Antonio, internal conflicts within the Afghan community inhibited groups from coming together. An Afghan community member shared that when women stepped into leadership positions in Chicago, they endured harsh criticism from men in the Afghan community. A member in San Antonio stated that in the early stages of the arrival, there was a lack of trust between different groups in the Afghan community because they were only trying to help their own family members and relatives from their home provinces. This initially left some Afghans disconnected from the community. Similarly, in northern Virginia, community members described minimal coordination that led to siloed efforts, making the work less impactful. This was compounded by the separation between grassroots work and government initiatives.

A Seat at the Table

To sustain the engagement of the broader Afghan community in assisting evacuees, members stressed the importance of Afghans having a seat at the policymaking table. They felt that actively involving the Afghan community in funding and programmatic planning conversations acknowledges the need for their perspective and keeps them engaged and helps ensure that time and money are allocated to effectively meet the evacuees' needs. In San Antonio, a community member recommended that the Afghan community must continue to raise their voices. In northern Virginia, community members recommended increased government funding for Afghan organizations directly assisting Afghan evacuees. One suggested that the government could partner with private organizations to provide professional training and vocational education for Afghan evacuees.

If you want to keep [the Afghan community] engaged, one: you keep them informed, and two, you keep them a part of the conversation. You come to them in the decision-making process, don't come to them after the decision has been made, but make them a part of the decision-making process (Afghan community leader, northern Virginia).

Community Stakeholder Experiences Supporting Afghan Evacuees

Between November 2021 and February 2022 more than 10,000 Afghan evacuees resettled in Texas, 1,900 in Illinois, and 5,100 in northern Virginia.³⁴ Receiving so many individuals and families in such a short period meant that local communities did not have much lead time to prepare supports. Nevertheless, many community stakeholders engaged in the process of supporting Afghan evacuees. These included refugee resettlement agencies, community-based organizations, ethnic community-based organizations, schools, health care settings, local government offices, landlords, employers, lawyers, and more. Community stakeholders reported several challenges they confronted and gaps in services during this early period of resettling Afghan evacuees. They also shared the resources and relationships they drew upon to address the challenges and identified best practices in serving evacuees under these constraints.

Challenges Faced by Stakeholders

Stakeholders shared many challenges they navigated within their organizations and in their local resettlement settings as they worked to support evacuees in their communities.

Insufficient and Restricted Funding. Community-based organizations that are not resettlement affiliates do not receive federal funding to support resettlement services the same way that resettlement agencies did, however, the high levels of demand on resettlement agencies meant that community-based organizations in all three study sites were stepping in to assist with core resettlement service provision. The inequity in access to funding was a source of frustration for community-based organization staff across sites.

There's been zero money made available to any of the community groups from any governmental source, which is a source of great frustration for me. Because the resettlement agencies don't leave their offices, they don't work in the community and all the work that has to be done is in the community (Afghan community leader, northern Virginia).

A community-based organization director in Chicago researched grants to apply for and found that grant processes would require more hours than she had capacity for, and that calls for funding were geared towards resettlement agencies.

Limited Time for Staff Training. Resettlement stakeholders across all three sites provided initial training to community stakeholders about Afghan culture and general resettlement processes. That said, due to the trauma of the emergency evacuation, even experienced resettlement providers were facing unique challenges in meeting the needs of the Afghan arrivals. For these stakeholders, it helped to have ongoing trainings. A Chicago stakeholder shared that they received weekly trainings, and a San Antonio stakeholder also shared that follow-up trainings were more useful as the trainers themselves were better informed. However, across all three sites, community stakeholders reported that due to the emergency nature of the evacuation, many did not have time to go to trainings and instead had to access supports in an ad hoc manner. Notably, one community stakeholder from San Antonio reflected on a topic that was missing from the training: “We have not had training in terms of recognizing whether there might be issues of household abuse going on.” Although it is not clear whether there was a specific incident of concern in this case, this quote does suggest some anxiety about being unprepared.

Language Gaps and Staff Diversity. Although some resettlement organizations had the resources to hire Dari and Pashto speakers, not all stakeholders were in this position. The effects resulting from a gap in language capacity with which to serve their Afghan clients were different for different kinds of providers. Educators in Chicago, from two separate schools, explained that telephonic translation services were not free, and providing this service to newly arrived students was putting a strain on the school budgets.

I’m a licensed clinical social worker, but there’s not much I can do with someone who can’t speak English, and not even proficiently. Because the folks I’ve worked with from Afghanistan who do have some English proficiency, doing something like a therapeutic relationship with them isn’t possible for me. They’re not at that level of proficiency and they’re not going to be able to adequately communicate (Community stakeholder, Chicago).

Some agencies and organizations began hiring evacuees to serve in frontline positions and bridge the language gap, but some stakeholders reported that they needed familiarity and experience navigating US systems and institutions, and the combination of these skills among a team would serve evacuees best.

Bureaucratic Red Tape. A cluster of pressing challenges that resettlement providers named related to immigration bureaucracy. One stakeholder in San Antonio described having to apply for SIV status multiple times for the same client when they felt the paperwork was all in order, as well as issues with long wait times on the phone with immigration officers. Stakeholders described frustrating experiences

having to redo paperwork due to small clerical errors, leaving their Afghan client without benefits they were eligible for. In a health care setting in Chicago, stakeholders described the amount of documentation and paperwork required before Afghan patients could be seen as “organized chaos.”

Lack of Capacity, Resources, and Staff Burnout. During the first several months that resettlement organizations were tasked with accommodating so many new clients, the scale of need outstripped the resources these agencies had available. Several stakeholders across all three sites noted the high rates of resettlement staff overwhelm and burnout due to the relentless levels of demand. One northern Virginia community stakeholder who had been volunteering observed, “When there [are] caseworkers with 300 people, the families’ cases, of course they’re only human and can only take so many calls or set up so many appointments in a day.”

It’s a time we’ll never forget. It wasn’t quite the normal resettlement process; it was an emergency, right? It was, as everyone is aware of. If you could see our outlook calendars. We would put [evacuee] arrivals on the calendar. I think it looked like a battlefield (Community stakeholder, San Antonio).

Access Challenges. The geographic patterns of resettlement sometimes presented challenges for service providers working with evacuees. For example, one stakeholder in northern Virginia described the concentration of over 2,000 Afghans living in close proximity, which made service provision easier but the volume of demand significant, while in other parts of the state Afghans were widely dispersed, making it challenging in for resettlement staff to reach them.

Lack of Gender Alignment in Service Provision. Due to a preference for gender alignment between evacuees and professional staff providing services, some health care providers and resettlement organizations lacked the capacity to serve Afghan evacuees in a culturally appropriate way.

I’m at a disadvantage with all women. And my interpreters are male, both of them.... It’s a real culture shock to be in with a male and being examined. That’s really rough. We try to be as culturally sensitive as possible (Community stakeholder, Chicago).

Another mental health provider shared that a male Afghan patient who was referred for services could not find a male therapist, and as a result, his mental health needs went unmet.

Health Risks. In the months that Afghan evacuees were moving off military bases and into communities, COVID-19 mitigation policies were in place in many communities across the country. One community volunteer in Chicago explained that she stopped helping with the resettlement of Afghan evacuees because she felt it put her health at risk. Another expressed frustration that he could not accompany an Afghan youth to the emergency room due to hospital policy, leaving the child alone to navigate the hospital stay. In San Antonio, community-based organization staff mourned the loss of

“welcome walks,” which they credited with “healing power” but were called off during the height of the pandemic.

Gaps in Integration Services

Stakeholders described many challenges in providing support to evacuees in the early period of evacuees’ arrival, but their more pressing concerns included gaps in services that could not be filled. Many gaps identified by stakeholders reflected the well-documented and long-standing issues faced by refugee resettlement providers across the US (Darrow 2015, 2018; Kerwin and Nicholson 2021; Kreisberg, de Graauw, and Gleeson 2022).

Lack of Affordable Housing and Discrimination. The State Department’s Reception and Placement program requires refugee resettlement agencies to locate and secure housing for newly arrived refugees, and to pay for the first month of rent. And yet, lack of access to affordable housing is one of the endemic issues in refugee resettlement. Often the housing that is available for rent is too expensive for refugees to afford once they are employed due to the pattern of employment in low-wage work for this population. Stakeholders offered multiple reasons why affordable housing was hard to locate for newly arrived Afghans, including the high cost of housing as the predominant barrier. In Chicago, a caseworker from a housing assistance community-based organization noted that resettlement agencies drew down funding reserves to secure housing for Afghan clients, but as soon as the agency support ended, these same clients could not afford their rent with their salaries alone. A second factor leading to insufficient access to affordable housing was discrimination. An Afghan community member in northern Virginia, who was assisting in efforts to locate housing, shared that they faced discrimination from apartment complex managers who refused to rent to Afghans, and a landlord in Chicago spoke about the damage his Afghan tenants had done to his apartments and said that he was hesitant to continue renting to Afghans as a result.

Flexible Cash Assistance. Amid the landscape of high levels of demand for services and affordable living arrangements, financial support was a top priority.

The number one thing that comes up again, and again, and again, that I believe would help all of our clients, regardless of status, is some sort of direct cash assistance. It’s great if we are able to, as an agency, pay someone’s rent, or maybe provide some bus cards to cover transportation to and from work until they start getting regular paychecks, and it’s great that [they] have [food stamps] to cover food needs, but if [they] could get just get some direct cash to buy, for example, hygiene products, diapers for a young child, or just spend on whatever—let the family prioritize what their needs are. That would be to me the most powerful (Community stakeholder, Chicago).

Mental Health Services. The need for mental health services rose dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, and access to these services proved challenging.³⁵ For caseworkers and health care professionals working with Afghans across all three sites, this gap in services was of great concern due to the trauma that so many experienced during the emergency evacuation.

Unfortunately, many of the kids we would then see were dealing with a lot of horrible thoughts and experiences for several months before they finally got seen by a medical professional (Community stakeholder, Virginia).

Similarly, Afghan community leaders disclosed the need for mental health services at military bases.

I wish there was some sort of mental health help provided for them at the camps, throughout the whole process. We had women who had miscarriages at the bases. I had a client that on top of a miscarriage found out her brother had died in Kabul. She was a complete mess, and we tried to find volunteer counselors, but it is so difficult to find someone to help them who speaks the language and understands the culture (Community stakeholder, Virginia).

Legal Services. Stakeholders from all three sites repeatedly named a top concern in working with Afghan evacuees as the unmet need for legal services. Services were needed to help with immigration processes, such as SIV and asylum application filing, requests for exemptions in cases where Afghan government-issued documentation had been left behind or lost, and support with applications for status adjustments and family reunification. In a separate brief,³⁶ we examined the experiences of legal service providers and found that they faced challenges due to the timing of government policies, slow application processing times, lack of interpretation services, and certain characteristics of some evacuees—low English language fluency, lack of knowledge of the US legal system, among others—that complicated their ability to navigate the immigration system.

Certification for Professionals. Several community stakeholders in northern Virginia and San Antonio reported the main barriers to workforce entry for evacuees who were career professionals and held certain college degrees and certifications was accessing affordable recertification programs and having time to pursue them in addition to their work and family obligations.

Accessible English as a Second Language Training. Many Afghan evacuees had little or no English language training prior to their arrival. Afghan evacuees interviewed and stakeholders raised similar concerns. A stakeholder in San Antonio explained that classes offered once a week were insufficient for new language learners and that for mothers with children at home these in-person classes were inaccessible due to a lack of child-care options. Community stakeholders in Chicago and northern Virginia also noted that there were insufficient accessible ESL learning opportunities available for new arrivals.

Longer-Term Services. Community stakeholders noted the short duration of federally funded resettlement services as an issue of concern. Many were less familiar with refugee resettlement work, where this issue is well documented.

The other thing was shortage of the program. We expected such a big program to be continued for at least two years. Within two years we could address many of their health concerns—not only awareness, but also as I mentioned, their financial sustainability and consistency is very important (Community stakeholder, northern Virginia).

Another northern Virginia community stakeholder expressed frustration with the 90-day funding period and felt that not enough was being done to address Afghan families who were still living in crisis situations: “There’s hundreds of families that are stuck.... Traditional resettlement is a 90-day process. We are going on two years and are still in the throes of it. So, more is required.”

Drawing on Resources and Relationships to Overcome Challenges

Although community stakeholders reported several challenges and gaps in services, they also highlighted some of the critical relationships and key resources that they turned to as they supported evacuees.

Partnerships with Resettlement Agencies

Community members acting as sponsors, local employers, medical professionals, and community-based organization staff all reported that working in tandem with local refugee resettlement agencies increased the feasibility of their efforts while decreasing some potential challenges. For example, one employer in Chicago explained that his trust in hiring Afghans was supported by the work done by the resettlement agency.

[When] we hire out of [a community-based organization], we know that they’re legal to work, and there’s a whole department at an awesome nonprofit that takes care of this. What they do on that end we should probably get into because it’s amazing... besides having job posting boards, and the ability to find employees who are very willing to work hard...we’re able to have resources for training, interpretation, evaluating employees or potential employees, evaluating them once they’re hired for promotions and skillsets (Community stakeholder, Chicago).

Resettlement agencies also connected Afghan clients to benefits, thus relieving other actors with less experience navigating this often murky bureaucratic terrain. One hospital staff member in northern

Virginia reiterated the idea that resettlement agencies often served as the linchpin in the network of stakeholders supporting the Afghan evacuee community.

The refugee resettlement agencies were on the frontline. They were the first people the majority of the [Afghan] families saw... I felt like partnering with the refugee resettlement agencies was invaluable. We got real-time information as a hospital, in terms of cases that needed additional help from a health standpoint (Community stakeholder, northern Virginia).

At the same time, the refugee resettlement agencies benefitted from engagement with community stakeholders. When the evacuation from Afghanistan occurred, the resettlement sector in the US was still recovering from weakened infrastructure left by the previous administration. Refugee resettlement was at its lowest point since the sector's inception,³⁷ and staff capacity was not nearly where it needed to be to welcome a large new influx of arrivals (Beers 2020; Darrow and Howsam Scholl 2020).

The refugee resettlement agencies that were on the ground—they had already been stripped of so many resources because of the [previous] administration at the time, so they were not prepared for this onslaught of new arrivals. So, it took a lot of grassroots organization mobilization to support the refugee agencies within the first initial few months (Community stakeholder, northern Virginia).

Stakeholders explicitly described many of the efforts they made as supplementing and complementing a refugee resettlement system unable to effectively serve the extraordinarily large numbers of arrivals. Another northern Virginia faith-based stakeholder shared,

There were many groups...that kind of stepped in to try and help fill the gaps, and just to, on a basic level help people coming just feel seen and heard. And when there [were resettlement] caseworkers with, I don't know, 300 people, the families' cases, of course, they're only human and can only take so many calls or set up so many appointments in a day. So, that was a huge hole in a way that [we] and I'm sure other groups like us tried to step in and help (Community stakeholder, northern Virginia).

Stakeholder Networks

Stakeholders in all three sites pointed to communication across community-based organizations and networks as a critical factor that enabled them to draw on each other and share information, resources, and training. They used phrases such as “community,” “collaborative,” and “partnership” in describing their relationships with the broader stakeholder community and how they connected in their efforts. The entities included a wide range of organizations, including hospitals, pro bono legal organizations and law firms, faith groups, small local foundations, local businesses, food banks, and community colleges. In addition, we heard that through networks, local landlords and employers extended opportunities, individual community members contributed in-kind donations and volunteered, and local

organizations recruited translators and cultural brokers from within the established Afghan communities. One community-based organization stakeholder in San Antonio reflected on the value of being part of these networks: “We all kind of learned from each other, from our mistakes, from our wins, I guess, and so that was really good.”

Government Resources

Resettlement and community-based organization stakeholders named government support at various levels as crucial to the success of efforts to support Afghan evacuees. Some resettlement agencies reported drawing on federal funding, specifically the Ethnic Community Self-Help Grant,³⁸ which helped Afghan evacuees who were eligible for ORR-funded benefits find jobs, learn English, assist youth in college preparation, learn US customs and laws, and start the process toward citizenship. Other federal programs mentioned included the Preferred Communities funding,³⁹ which supports refugee and ORR-eligible populations with challenging needs that require special attention, including those with serious medical conditions, women at risk, and elderly refugees. In Chicago, one stakeholder credited a newly initiated state funding stream in Illinois, State Afghan Placement and Assistance Program,⁴⁰ as the main source of financial support for local service provision and another state program with providing funds for tutoring and hiring additional ESL instructors. In addition, a northern Virginia stakeholder named the state’s Department of Emergency Management as a welcome resource in their relief efforts. A stakeholder in Chicago credited government officials with leading the way on galvanizing private donations, stating, “Our state senator, Ram Villivalam, our representative here, Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky’s office, [Senator] Durbin’s office, our alderman, they all came together; they started it actually with a donation, and then once people found out, they started donating, and companies were donating.” Notably, not all stakeholders benefitted from or sought government support.

We’ve never gone after government money. We didn’t want to be hampered by restrictions of federal or state grant, so we never went after it. We want to have unrestricted money...we’re accountable, but we don’t want to have to serve this person, but not that person, or serve you for x number of years, but not after that. We don’t want to have anything to do with that (Community stakeholder, San Antonio).

Best Practices

Stakeholders described innovative efforts to support Afghan arrivals in their communities. Drawing on insights across the study sites, we identified several best practices.

Empowering Evacuees and Other Afghans as Connectors

To effectively support evacuees in linguistically and culturally responsive ways, Afghan community members were a critical asset—both Afghan community members who had been settled and had lived in the US for years, and evacuees themselves. Stakeholders shared ways that hiring Afghans in key service provider positions and relying on Afghan community members to serve as community navigators and intermediaries helped make up for knowledge gaps among staff and build more effective and trusting relationships with newcomers.

HIRING AFGHAN STAFF MEMBERS

Resettlement agencies and other stakeholders spoke about hiring Afghans in key service provider positions. In northern Virginia, the resettlement organization set up an entirely new office staffed up almost entirely with recent Afghan arrival evacuees. There were many examples of Afghans being hired in organizations across San Antonio, oftentimes earlier SIV arrivals who already had some grounding in the local community and bilingual language ability. Stakeholders mentioned filling positions with Afghan community members (both established and newly arrived evacuee community members), including community health workers, cultural liaisons in a local school district, group leaders at an employer that hired many new arrivals, and language access initiative staff in city government. Many stakeholders across the sites discussed hiring established Afghans to fill service positions that benefited from trusting relationships within the Afghan community. A community-based organization in Chicago shared that they hired Afghan women to serve as “field workers” to make home visits, interpret at government offices, and accompany evacuees to appointments. A northern Virginia community-based organization stakeholder in the health field noted the value of having a large Afghan community in the region for these important roles.

Thankfully, we live in an area that has a large Afghan community, so for me, it was very easy. I could text a bunch of people and say, ‘hey, I need some interpreters,’ or ‘I need help with this. Could someone help me?’ and I’d get like 5 or 6 people. So, I kind of relied on a handful of people who were familiar with the culture, familiar with the questions, and they could then work with families directly. They weren’t necessarily just my interpreters; they sort of developed a relationship and...[took] care of the families themselves (Community stakeholder, northern Virginia).

HIRING OR WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS

The need for interpretation services was immediate and lasting, across the gamut of stakeholder organizations. Stakeholders described hiring Dari and Pashto interpreters to join their staff or tapping into available interpretation services. We heard about this taking place at refugee resettlement

organizations, legal providers, schools, and employers. Although using telephone interpretation services could be an alternative, stakeholders shared that having consistent interpreter staff was more effective. This often came up in the health care setting, where sensitive information had to be communicated, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness is critical. A local hospital in Chicago identified bilingual individuals with Dari and Pashto ability to serve as interpreters, which was an urgent need. They found having this in-house capacity that was rooted in the community was more efficient than relying on phone interpretation services.

VOLUNTARY COMMUNITY NAVIGATION AND ADVOCACY

As previously mentioned, many stakeholders in San Antonio shared that established members of the local Afghan community had important roles providing orientation and teaching newcomers about how to navigate different systems and challenges in the US—all on an informal, voluntary basis. They worked to support newcomers and fill needs not met by the resettlement agencies. This included troubleshooting many issues from benefits applications to car accidents, filling out forms, advocating for them, accompanying them to government offices, developing relationships with landlords and employers, and connecting newcomers to housing and job opportunities, and regularly providing “orientations” to newcomers. Other Afghan stakeholders described providing similar roles, serving as intermediaries for evacuees who lacked the language ability and facility with navigating US systems and institutions.

Addressing Urgent Needs, Removing Barriers, and Connecting Organizations

To respond to the unusual pace and magnitude of arrivals in communities, communities drew on a wide range of resources and collaborated in new ways.

GOVERNMENT-CONVENED COLLABORATIVES

In Chicago, the state of Illinois took the unusual step of funding and setting up a statewide resettlement initiative to complement resettlement agency efforts, whereby it would provide direct services normally provided by resettlement agencies and support additional evacuee arrivals. They set up a temporary center for evacuees at two hotels, contracting two ethnic community-based organizations that provided 24-hour service for several months. Evacuees were provided mental health supports, orientation and lessons about new systems, assistance enrolling their children in school, job placements, and permanent housing. The chief of staff for the Illinois DHS and a colleague lived in the hotel for several months. Processes were expedited to connect people to resources more quickly, such as

allowing them to apply for state identification onsite at the hotels. A stakeholder from a leading partner organization shared that this welcoming attitude, commitment from state leadership, and holistic services put evacuees in a stronger position than others who went through standard resettlement processes. The state-funded services provided a range of funds and programming.

In San Antonio, the city built on prior collaborative work it had facilitated around earlier migrant arrivals and organized a collaborative to organize response to the Afghan arrivals. When the resettlement agencies learned about the expected arrivals to the city, the collaborative brought together resettlement organizations, the local food bank, faith-based organizations, and other community-based organizations to coordinate to identify gaps, collect donations and organize volunteers, and provide assistance. They quickly set up a website for easy access for potential volunteers and Afghans seeking information and had regular meetings to share updates. This collaboration continued, with a summit organized well after the arrivals wave for 150 participants from resettlement agencies, city departments, faith-based organizations, schools districts, and other community stakeholders to discuss ongoing needs and organize working groups on housing, ESL, adult education and workforce development, mental health, and K-12 education.

CONNECTING ORGANIZATIONS AND FAITH GROUPS

Stakeholders emphasized the contributions of a wide range of organizations and volunteers within communities that were additive to resettlement agency efforts and provided different assets and capabilities.

- **Ethnic community-based organizations.** In Chicago, the state-led resettlement program funded and relied on local ethnic community-based organizations to provide direct services to arrivals, one Afghan-led and another rooted in the Palestinian community.

We're not going to [do] direct service because we're not grassroots...So, we work with community-based organizations, where people trust them, and the community-based organizations have the bilingual staff and bicultural staff to work with the communities...We're going to do it with community-based organizations that understand the Afghan community (Community stakeholder, Chicago).

- **Faith-based groups.** Stakeholders in San Antonio and northern Virginia spoke about the contributions of volunteer efforts from members of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and other faith-based organizations, especially home goods donations and time working with individual families.

- **Local university medical professionals.** In San Antonio, university medical professionals staffed a weekly refugee health clinic that shifted to serving primarily evacuees, which was held in a church.
- **Organizations new to refugee populations.** New organizations stepped into the work. One northern Virginia community-based organization stakeholder shared, for example, how the local Goodwill network provided jobs and workforce development opportunities to evacuees; though they had not worked previously with refugees, they realized the opportunity to reach valuable workers and learned from the resettlement agencies and other organizations how to best reach local Afghan talent.

EXPEDITING BUREAUCRATIC PROCESSES

A common feature was expediting long processes and exceptionally removing requirements that would have kept evacuee families from reaching needed services. For example, in northern Virginia, a government stakeholder pointed out that they made sure that children could be enrolled in school while their families were still in temporary housing and had no permanent address yet and similarly exhibited flexibility with health screening by tapping into federally qualified health centers rather than relying on local Departments of Health. In San Antonio, a health professional stakeholder shared that the county safety net clinic made an exception to its requirement that patients must have lived in the county for one year to provide immediate access to urgently needed health care services to pregnant women as they waited for slow processes to enroll in Medicaid. A San Antonio school stakeholder also shared that there were exceptions made to allow children to enroll in school to overcome challenges around missing or inaccurate identification documents, and missing vaccinations with months-long wait times to get vaccinated. In Chicago, processes that normally took six months took two to three days, with state government officials bringing staff and resources to hotels where evacuees were temporarily housed; evacuees could easily obtain a state ID, for example.

Bridging the Cultural and Information Gap between the Community and Newcomers

Given the stark differences between experiences and expectations in Afghanistan and new communities in the US, stakeholders emphasized the importance of bridging cultural and information gaps both for evacuees and for community members.

EDUCATING COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Organizations and community members lacked background on the new arrivals, and leaders took the initiative to educate and inform others about the population. A resettlement agency provider in San Antonio shared a number of concrete steps they took, including telling the local food bank which foods were appropriate for the population, developing letters for local housing complexes to clarify evacuees' benefits, and developing a relationship with a credit union to facilitate the opening of bank accounts for evacuees. Similarly, a school stakeholder pointed out the importance of preparing teachers and training them about the population and their cultural norms. In northern Virginia, a health stakeholder developed a cultural sensitivity training for hospital staff to teach them about Afghan culture, terms to use, and considerations in interacting with newly arrived Afghans; this included supporting families in filling out forms, including understanding their calendar to determine when vaccinations had taken place.

ADAPTING TO EVACUEES' NEEDS AND RESPECTING CULTURAL NORMS

Similarly, stakeholders shared the importance of meeting Afghans where they are and using appropriate communications tools and approaches. Many stakeholders emphasized the importance of cultural awareness and respect for evacuees' cultural norms and described adapting to evacuees' norms by avoiding having men speak to women and deferring to family preferences that a male relative speak on behalf of females. A northern Virginia resettlement stakeholder shared that there needs to be more cultural sensitivity training and acceptance of gender norms, such as women not working outside of the home.

We have to understand where they're coming from, what is allowed for them culturally, what is not. Not necessarily religiously, but culturally. So, I think to better prepare, something I would take away is prepare myself for any population that comes, to learn about them, their roots, their background, what is permissible, what is not (Community stakeholder, northern Virginia).

Stakeholders described making adjustments to respond to cultural and religious practices and norms. This included making halal food available for students, providing space and time for prayer to employees, and delivering culturally aware and respectful health care services to patients. A school stakeholder in San Antonio described when addressing problems that emerged for students or families, reaching out to Afghan community leaders, or "elders," to join group conversations. Many stakeholders emphasized the importance of having patience, empathy, and understanding.

Fostering Social Connection

In addition to addressing evacuees' immediate needs for work, housing, health care, and basic needs, many stakeholders emphasized the importance of attending to Afghans' needs for social connection and interaction, both with other Afghans and with other members of the broader local community. In an earlier section of this report, we stated that women evacuees wanted more opportunities to gather to socialize, exchange skills, and promote their well-being.

CONNECTIONS WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Across the sites, there were examples of efforts to foster social connection, from a cricket team at a school to youth mentoring efforts to pair children with established residents. A two-generation program with parents and children in northern Virginia run by a faith-based organization in partnership with a refugee resettlement agency which builds social connections between refugees and community members, connecting children to children and parents to parents, pivoted to serve the Afghan arrivals. The programming included weekly sessions of “intentional time [for] connection” for parents and their children to have an open space to connect and ask questions.

Kids who might see each other in school but not talk to each other have the chance to play games together and do projects together, and that's really invaluable. And just having a space for people come together and can meet, who otherwise maybe would cross paths but actually probably not because they shop at different grocery stores, or they don't cross paths for many reasons...There's friendships that have taken place and blossomed over these years because people just had the space and time set aside to connect (Community stakeholder, northern Virginia).

Similarly, in Chicago, a mentoring team worked with schools to get Afghan children enrolled in soccer and basketball so that they could integrate with the other kids, and the team also provided a mentoring program for some of the kids. In San Antonio, an explicit program was developed by a local community-based organization to pair Afghan families with volunteers who would provide welcoming activities, helping them navigate their new communities and providing social interaction with established residents. Stakeholders who served in this role shared that they connected their families to the local food bank to enroll in benefits, drove them to the school to help enroll their children and get them vaccinated, organized social events, started a weekly ESL class, and in some cases jumped in to help with family medical emergencies. They described significant and varied needs that families were encountering and presenting to them for troubleshooting. One San Antonio stakeholder shared that there is a need for more help and more involvement of more established community members.

[The evacuees are] lonely, these people are incredibly lonely. And, they're in apartment complexes with other Afghans and that communication is limited. When we come, they're like,

overjoyed... We just need more people...helpers, boots on the ground, I call it (Community stakeholder, San Antonio).

Another San Antonio stakeholder emphasized the critical value of such people-to-people efforts: “When people look at this gap and this welcome, they think, ‘That’s a nice thing to do.’ It’s more than nice—it’s essential.”

CONNECTIONS AND PROXIMITY WITH OTHER EVACUEES

A common challenge raised by stakeholders was social isolation of evacuees, in particular women, who were unlikely to work out of the home as the primary child care providers. Stakeholders shared several efforts to combat this isolation, such as organizing English or sewing classes, or organizing community events around the religious holidays of Iftar and Eid that explicitly encouraged participation of Afghan women. This resonates with what Afghan women interviewees shared regarding wanting more opportunities to be with other women and learn or exchange skills. Many stakeholders pointed out the value of placing evacuees near other evacuee families and other Afghan families for mutual assistance.

My heart goes out to those that are placed in very remote areas, areas where there’s not a big Muslim or Afghan population because they’re the ones who are truly struggling. language barrier, culture, you know, not having the resources we have in northern Virginia (Community stakeholder, northern Virginia).

Many stakeholders in San Antonio emphasized the benefit of concentrating evacuees in the Medical Center neighborhood, where most evacuees were housed. This was a specific neighborhood where they had easy access to places of worship, grocery stores that sell halal food, medical care, and other needed services. Several pointed out that evacuees preferred to be placed in that neighborhood but also shared that there was not sufficient high-quality affordable housing to fill all the need.

Recommendations

The experiences of the Afghan evacuees and the communities that received them highlight gaps in our current refugee resettlement system as well as the potential for leveraging a wider range of community resources and capacities to support humanitarian arrivals. Lessons from this study can inform improvements to programs and policies for Afghans who continue to face challenges, as well as other and future arrivals who encounter similar challenges around the immigration system, family reunification, housing, employment, and other areas of well-being and inclusion.

The following recommendations from stakeholder and evacuee interviewees offer guidance for new policies and practices that can better prepare the US government, resettlement agencies, and other stakeholders to respond to similar humanitarian crises, when large numbers of arrivals require assistance, in more cohesive and effective ways. We begin with recommendations that help meet the ongoing needs of Afghans, and then discuss broader practices and policies to be considered in the future.

Meeting the Ongoing Needs of Afghan Evacuees

Passage of the Afghan Adjustment Act. Findings emphasized that the uncertainty around parolees' future status has had a wide range of negative impacts on their ability to prosper and plan their future in the US.⁴¹ Evacuees noted several ways their temporary status impacted their daily lives, from limiting employment opportunities to impacting their mental health and ability to reunite with separated family members. Stakeholders consistently expressed the urgent need for passage of the Afghan Adjustment Act. Many argued that the US evacuation of a humanitarian population who would face persecution upon their return should justify Afghans' pathway to permanent residence in the US. Stakeholders shared that a prompt adjustment of status to a permanent residence pathway for the new arrivals would make it possible for them to establish themselves faster in the US, and it would reduce the pressure on the asylum system and other immigration processes that are currently backlogged.

Quickly reunify family members. Extended families are often separated during the refugee resettlement process, but in an emergency evacuation, even immediate families were fractured, with some left behind, some ending up in the US, and some residing in third countries temporarily. Most evacuees reported leaving children and family members behind. This weighed heavily on their minds daily. Most stakeholders also raised this stress as a key issue and preoccupation of the evacuees they

worked with. They emphasized that immigration processes should help reunify those families as quickly as possible. Having family members nearby would not only give evacuees peace of mind that their family is out of harm but could create a support system for them that can support their integration in the US.

Support access to mental health services for an extended period and with linguistically and culturally responsive staff. Humanitarian populations fleeing from conflict and other dangerous circumstances likely experienced trauma, family separation, and the challenges of beginning new lives in a new unfamiliar context. Evacuees reported being in a state of poor mental health due to their evacuation experiences, family separation, and post-resettlement stressors. As evacuees initially arrived, stakeholders were preoccupied with securing basic needs such as housing, benefits access, and employment. While practical needs must be addressed, stakeholders said that offering mental health services with culturally aligned professionals who speak their native language need to be available to help evacuees address the unresolved trauma and symptoms they continue to experience.

Increase accessibility of education and employment services. Interviewees consistently discussed the challenging economic and financial circumstances of evacuees working in low-paying jobs. Many evacuees stressed that their employment income, or their husband's if they were married, was only enough to cover basic expenses and found it difficult to find affordable housing options. Afghan men and women sought opportunities to help improve their economic situations, including obtaining a second job, improving their English, getting a driver's license, and exchanging skills with other women. Stakeholders seeking to support Afghans in accessing work identified both unemployment and underemployment as key challenges. Many understood that attending ESL classes could help many Afghan evacuees and suggested ways to reduce barriers to access, such as provision of transportation and child care. In addition, many raised the issue of underemployment for professionals who arrived with degrees and licenses earned in Afghanistan. They recommended increasing accessibility to educational programs, including free or low-cost reaccreditation programs and employment services for professionals to support their advancement into employment better aligned with their skills.

Lessons for Future Populations

Although community stakeholders welcomed Afghan evacuees to the best of their ability and under enormous pressure, they offered several suggestions for areas that would benefit from additional resources and would be helpful for providing ongoing support to Afghan evacuees as well as future humanitarian populations arriving under similar circumstances.

The biggest concern I have is that there was no national model established in this process. And, so, it's community by community, service provider by service provider, working from a solutions orientation standpoint.... If this happened again tomorrow, would the US be prepared? It would not.

—Community stakeholder, San Antonio

Engage community leaders, groups, and stakeholders that are culturally aligned prior to the arrival and throughout an extended resettlement process so that their cultural insights, backgrounds and lived experiences are taken into consideration and can lead to more effective and efficient programming and service delivery. Stakeholders emphasized the need to develop opportunities for these leaders to access federal, state, and local funding as quickly as possible so that their skills, contributions, and resources can fill critical gaps. Afghan community leaders expressed frustration at being restricted from accessing certain funding streams. Evacuees reported highly positive experiences when they received services or attended programs through ethnic community-based organizations. Including established members and organizations from the impacted community in programmatic discussions and funding opportunities could relieve language and capacity issues experienced by resettlement agency staff due to the high volume of cases.

Provide extended and ongoing training and orientations for community stakeholders and new arrivals. As more organizations and individuals get involved in resettlement, equipping them with necessary knowledge about newcomers is important. Stakeholders expressed that trainings should be provided for all stakeholders interacting with the newly arrived groups and should be focused on the background and context of arrival in the US, protocols for resettlement support, best practices for working with newly arrived individuals and their families, in addition to their cultural and social norms. They said that this should be provided in a series format so that new information about best practices can be shared as they are developed over time. Although we found that training and community navigation was informally provided by community members, stakeholders emphasized that orientations for new arrivals provided by resettlement agencies should include cultural orientation on US systems and institutions, including the legal, health, and education systems, as well as “know your rights” sessions. They suggested that such training be offered over an extended period as well, so new arrivals can build on their knowledge over time and have an opportunity to ask questions without being overwhelmed by information.

Ensure agencies, organizations, and groups working with the new arrivals have trained staff who speak their native language. Providing linguistically responsive services was a significant and consistent challenge reported by stakeholders. Although community stakeholders made many efforts to enhance this capacity and provide in-person service provision by native speakers, it was an ongoing challenge to source people with these skills, especially with the required licenses and expertise to carry out certain roles, such as in health care.

Increase communication and collaboration across community stakeholder groups to reduce potential gaps in services. Many stakeholders emphasized the value of having a wide range of organizations involved in newcomer response and reflected on effective collaboration examples as well as missed opportunities. Collaborative spaces that regularly connect refugee resettlement agencies, ethnic community-based organizations, community-based organizations, and other stakeholder groups could help them efficiently leverage resources and share information about potential funding sources and changes in local, state, and federal policies. Given the centrality of newcomers' housing challenges, stakeholders suggested that these collaborative efforts should also connect to local advocacy efforts to increase affordable housing access and work closely with landlords to reduce discrimination toward the newly arrived group.

Although the resettlement system has expanded its capacity as refugee admissions have risen closer to historical levels, the number of people fleeing violence globally continues to rise.⁴² The US has created new entry pathways⁴³ in response to the growing number of displaced people and has granted many new arrivals parole, including over 176,000 Ukrainians through the Uniting for Ukraine program and 340,000 Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelans with US sponsors⁴⁴ through a new parole program. In addition, up to 529,250 migrants will be allowed to be processed annually through the new CBP One app and granted parole⁴⁵ as they navigate the immigration system. The US now has over a million individuals living under humanitarian parole. Although they may have distinct experiences from Afghan evacuees, including eligibility for government-funded refugee resettlement services,⁴⁶ they may confront similar challenges navigating the immigration system, securing stable employment and housing, and seeking to be reunited with family members if they remain on humanitarian parole for a prolonged period of time as Afghans have.

Insights from the experiences of Afghan evacuees and the stakeholders who assisted them offers lessons for the level of resources and policies that may be helpful to better support populations who arrive under similar circumstances in the future and other parolee populations. It also presents an opportunity to inform and develop a model to welcome and resettle new arrivals in a short period,

under challenging circumstances, and that has the capacity to set them on a stable path to inclusion in the US.

Notes

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About the Authors

Diana Guelespe is a senior research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute and a member of Urban's inaugural 2022–24 Equity Scholars Program. She is a sociologist with many years of experience working with immigrant and refugee communities at the local, state, and national levels. Her areas of expertise include immigrant integration, well-being and access to community and government programs. Her qualitative research on mixed-status immigrant families and their daily challenge of driving without a license led to subsequent changes in state and local policies to improve access to driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants in Illinois and Washington, DC. It has also served as a resource to community groups in other states seeking similar policy changes. Guelespe holds a PhD in sociology from Loyola University Chicago.

Hamutal Bernstein is a senior fellow in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where she leads Urban's program on immigration. Her research focuses on the wellbeing and inclusion of immigrant and refugee families. Her areas of expertise include immigration, workforce development and training, and human services. She is a mixed-methods researcher, with experience in policy analysis, program monitoring and evaluation, technical assistance, multilingual qualitative and survey data collection, and qualitative and quantitative data analysis. She is a principal investigator on the Annual Survey of Refugees for the US Department of Health and Human Services and leads research on immigrant families' access to safety net supports. Bernstein received her BA in international relations from Brown University and her PhD in government from Georgetown University.

Jessica Darrow is an associate instructional professor at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice. Darrow's research grapples with the organizational-level challenges in implementing federal policies related to refugee resettlement and unaccompanied minors in the US, the role of non-governmental actors in carving out nontraditional spaces of citizenship for refugees and migrants, and the impacts of the Trump administration anti-refugee policies on refugee resettlement organizations. She is a principal investigator of a borderlands research project studying the health and wellness context for migrants attempting to enter the United States. Darrow's ongoing research agenda is focused on the ways that policy resistance is enacted within immigrant serving organizations, and on explaining the power and limits of this resistance in terms of a larger project of (re)engagement with social justice. Darrow has international practice experience working with refugees

and local communities in Rwanda and has served as Executive Director of a grassroots, science education nonprofit working in East and South Africa.

Soumita Bose is a research analyst in the Urban Institute's Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population and a co-lead of the Immigration Working Group. Her research focuses on immigration and refugee resettlement, community-engaged methods, and programs for children and families. Prior to joining the Urban Institute, Bose completed her MPH at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, where she focused on child and adolescent health and immigration and health. During her MPH program, she was a social and behavioral health intern at the Association for State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and a youth case management intern at the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Bose holds a BA as a double major from the University of California, Berkeley, in molecular and cell biology (neurobiology) and cognitive science.

Shruti Nayak is a policy analyst in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population, where she researches and provides technical assistance for workforce development and apprenticeship initiatives. She holds a BA in political science and public policy analysis from the Ohio State University. Before joining Urban, Nayak studied congressional processes as a research assistant at the Ohio State University and as an intern at the Brookings Institution.

Danielle Kwon was formerly a research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute. She primarily worked with the Child Care and Development Fund Policies Database, tracking state and territory child care subsidy policies and on microsimulation modeling of various social safety net programs. Her research interests include racial and ethnic disparities in human services, early child care and education, and the experiences of low-income Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. Kwon received her BA in public policy from Duke University.

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