

New Neighbors:

Three ways giving can support Afghan refugees in Vermont

THE TAKEAWAY

Afghan refugees arriving in Vermont need interpreters, jobs, places to live, and assistance acclimating to a new country. Charitable individuals can help. Here's how:

- Help fund interpreters and legal services
- Help fund transportation
- Help fund housing



FLIGHT MECHANIC, TEACHER, police officer, and carpenter. These are among the occupations that Afghan evacuees who have recently arrived in Vermont held in their home country before they were airlifted out in August amid chaos and desperation. Now they are rebuilding their lives and finding their way in a new country. Philanthropy can extend the warm welcome our new neighbors deserve and make their transition easier.

Around 200 Afghans have already arrived in Vermont and another 80 are expected by April, for a total of 280, although that number could increase. They are being assisted by the state's two refugee resettlement groups. The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants Vermont (USCRI) in Colchester has helped more than 8,000 refugees from around the world resettle in Vermont over the last 40 years, primarily in

Chittenden County. It is now helping approximately 180 Afghans resettle in Chittenden County, Montpelier, and Rutland. Meanwhile an organization that is newer to Vermont, The Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), established an office in Brattleboro last year and is resettling 100 Afghans in Windham and Bennington Counties.

Vermont volunteers are already helping, but more help is needed including private resources to augment the patchwork of federal and state programs that provide services and aid. Especially now, donations that allow nonprofits to meet immediate needs go a long way to cut through bureaucracy and help people who have fled their homes and then spent months at military bases. The good news? "We have had so many people step up," said Joe Wiah, director of the Ethiopian Community Development Council's Vermont office.



There are so many angels out there.

Tracy Dolan, director of the Vermont State Refugee Office, agreed. "Community members and volunteers have been amazing," she said. In Chittenden County, one volunteer has cooked and delivered hot meals to new arrivals at the airport, for example. "There are so many angels out there," Dolan said.

Still, there are many needs and funders can help. Here's how:

Fund interpreters and legal services

About 65 Afghans have already arrived in the Brattleboro area and many of them want to work as soon as they can, partly to send money back to family. "These folks are very pressured and driven to begin earning money any way possible to send home to their families in Afghanistan," said Alex Beck, Welcoming Communities manager with the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation, which is providing employment assistance and other resettlement help.

Employers are eager to hire new Afghan arrivals in Brattleboro, but many evacuees speak little English. Employers need interpreters who speak Pashto or Dari, and this expense is an obstacle, Beck said. Donations can fund interpreters and overcome this problem. One idea is to create a program of traveling interpreters who could float between employers. Some might need interpretation for ten hours for onboarding, others might need it for 20 hours a week for six weeks, Beck said. In larger states like Virginia and California that have a significant Afghan immigrant population, and where big employers are often accustomed to hiring immigrants, interpretation is often built into company culture. "But we don't have that," Beck said. "It's infrastructure that doesn't exist."

And especially for production jobs, interpretation is vital for New Americans who are still in the process of learning English. "You can't ensure someone is comfortable and safe at work if they can't engage in that initial onboarding and training," Beck said. A small number of Afghans who are arriving speak English fluently and can serve as interpreters and translators, but more funding is needed to hire them, he added.

Donations will help Vermont's two refugee resettlement organizations and their nonprofit partners increase capacity to offer more consistent interpreter services to more organizations in need. Philanthropic advisors at the Vermont Community Foundation can assist charitable individuals who want to give to this effort. This giving will build on previous support, including donations to USCRI through the Community Foundation's VT COVID-19 Response Fund.

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Another big need is legal services. Many of the Afghan evacuees entered the U.S. under humanitarian parole, which is different from refugee status and creates legal uncertainty. Unless Congress acts on a proposed law that would change their status, evacuees will be required to apply for asylum or other programs that confer permanent legal status and a path to citizenship. "We need an in-house lawyer who will help us on asylum cases," Wiah said. It's unclear if Congress will act and, in the meantime, people are anxious and need legal help. Dolan agreed and said the state is working with resettlement agencies and nonprofit partners including the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV) to strategize how to build legal capacity for processing asylum cases. "Of all the things we're worried about...that's the one that's definitely going to be the biggest lift," she said.



Help fund transportation

Many Afghans want to work but need transportation to get to and from jobs. Public transportation in Vermont is limited, especially outside Chittenden County. It takes time for people to earn enough to buy a car, obtain a driver's license, and become familiar with driving in a new country. In Brattleboro, the ECDC would like to buy a van that volunteers or staff could use to help groups of Afghans get to jobs, medical appointments, and other locations. Right now, new refugee arrivals in Brattleboro are initially placed on the campus of World Learning and School for International Training, where they have temporary housing and access to language and orientation classes, among other programs. Evacuees are moving off campus gradually, as housing opens. The goal is to have all the new arrivals in their own housing and off the campus by May. "But then we will really have transportation needs... We really need a van," said Wiah. Across the state, support for nonprofits that help people get vehicles will help new arrivals, whatever their country of origin. Nonprofits such as Good News Garage in Chittenden County have a long history of providing low-cost vehicles and accepting donations of used vehicles from charitable individuals.

Support housing construction

With help from landlords, housing nonprofits, and volunteers, refugee case workers are finding rental housing for new arrivals, but it is not easy, especially in Chittenden County where housing costs are high, and supply is extremely tight. In the short-term, charitably minded people can give to nonprofits that provide affordable housing for immigrants and refugees so they are adequately staffed to help. Longer term, donors can support zoning changes and advocacy to stimulate new units, especially in the "missing middle" category. Vermont badly needs more inventory for middle income people who earn too much to qualify for publicly subsidized housing but not enough to afford homes or condos in the state's overheated private housing market. Right now, case workers are finding housing for the



refugees arriving in Brattleboro with the help of landlords and local volunteers, but it is a time-consuming process.

"We're being creative about how people are housed, but we need new units, we need new units, we need new units," Beck said, repeating himself for emphasis. And while refugees arriving in Vermont often qualify for public rental assistance programs, many will earn too much to qualify as they get established in jobs. Vermont needs more homes and apartments that are "not income restricted," Beck said. "Refugees and immigrants, at large, are working class populations. They are not low-income relative to how we categorize folks in Vermont, and I think that is really important in housing discussions," he said.

Deeper Reading

[Vermont State Refugee Office](#)

[Vermont Housing Needs Assessment](#)

For recommendations about organizations in Vermont working on this issue, reach out to Jane Kimble at jkimble@vermontcf.org or (802) 388-3355 ext. 286 to be connected with a philanthropic advisor.

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