

Domestic and International Intermediary Sites in Operation Allies Welcome Phase I and II: National Conference Center, Safe Havens, and Lily-Pads

The National Conference Center in Leesburg, VA has the essence of a college campus. In between the three primary buildings, weaving sidewalks converge into multiple open spaces where people can gather to eat, sit, socialize, play frisbee, or watch the squirrels run amuck. While typically used as a corporate convention and training space, the National Conference Center (NCC) currently serves as an intermediary site for Afghan evacuees between their stay in a third country, or “Lily-Pad,” and their ultimate resettlement destination in the United States for Phase II of Operation Allies Welcome (OAW). During Phase I of OAW, various military bases, or “Safe Havens,” across the country were used for this purpose. In Phase I, Afghans were brought either directly to one of the eight Safe Havens from Afghanistan, or first cycled through Lily-Pads. The Safe Havens were launched in a frenzy as the Biden administration attempted to evacuate as many people as possible from Afghanistan after the Taliban took over the capital city of Kabul. The Department of Defense (DoD), in conjunction with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) – the agency charged with handling OAW – first opened Fort Lee for 2,500 arrivals on July 30th, 2021, and soon after opened the remaining seven Safe Havens where around 75,000 Afghans came through before all were closed in mid-February of 2022.

Though the NCC is also logistically monitored and secured by DoD, it does not emit a militaristic atmosphere. Afghans are free to independently depart if they choose, and NCC will transport them to the airport to travel to their desired destination -- but not until they are first provided with comprehensive exit counseling¹. Thousands of staff representing multiple nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) work in collaboration to provide services to Afghan “guests” (as they are referred to by NCC staff) such as comprehensive legal presentations outlining various status eligibilities and processing information, behavioral and mental health services, English language classes, cultural orientations, education for children and youth, and medical assistance. Every person who comes through the property is given a mental health screening, which is a departure from the Safe Havens where individuals with mental health issues had to be flagged by legal service providers, case managers, or government staff. Although organization and functionality differed at each Safe Haven – some were much more chaotic than others – the NCC seems to be operating without major problems and performing the function it was designed to.

¹ In addition to pre-departure counseling, the Virtual Afghan Placement and Assistance program (VAPA) has recently been established as a tool to connect independent departures to the resettlement services they are entitled to receive.

However, it is unclear how much communication or follow-up NCC service providers can maintain with their Afghan clients, or the resettlement agencies to which they are assured, after their clients' departure. It is also unclear how much information NCC staff receives from staff on Lily-Pad sites from which the Afghans came. This element remains consistent across both Phase I and Phase II of the U.S. government's operation to successfully evacuate, relocate, and resettle tens of thousands of Afghan allies – there seems to be a lack of communication between bodies in charge of each element of the process. This excerpt is an attempt to provide context for resettlement service providers about where their Afghan clients have come from, and what they have experienced post-evacuation from their home country. Additionally, it identifies a few challenges that have arisen particularly during Phase II of OAW and recommends ways to solve them to ensure a continuity of care for all Afghan evacuees.

The Basics of the NCC and Safe Havens

Who is at the NCC, where are they coming from, and how long are they staying?

- Nearly 2,500 Afghans have arrived at the NCC since early March, and 668 are housed on the premises at the time of publication.
- The population coming through the NCC were evacuated from Afghanistan between early August 2021, and November 5th, 2021 – prior to arrival at the NCC, this population was distributed among third countries awaiting relocation to the U.S. These countries include Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kosovo, and Albania.
- The average length of stay is 22 days – staff aims for a maximum stay of 30 days, but exceptional circumstances occur that result in a longer stay.
- The majority of Afghans coming through the NCC are in the U.S. on [Humanitarian Parole](#), but eligible Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders at all stages of their processing have also come through, as well as fiancée visa holders, and lawful permanent residents (LPRs) accompanying their families.

What processing is done at the NCC?

- Cases are assured to resettlement agencies at each Afghan's final destination.
- Work authorization (I-765 forms) is filed and checked by attorneys for errors and inconsistencies, and subsequently adjudicated on the spot at a pop-up USCIS facility on the property.
- After the I-765 is filed, biometrics are conducted at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) facility, and if approved, EAD cards will be sent to the address of the resettlement agency to which the Afghan has been assured.
- Errors in names, birthdates, Alien numbers, and Tazkira² numbers have been reduced at the NCC, which has decreased the turnaround times for employment authorization documents (EADs), Social Security cards, and assurances.

² Afghan identity document

- Post-Chief of Mission approval SIVs, who just need to file an I-485 Adjustment of Status form before they can receive their lawful permanent resident status (Green Cards), are **not** able to do so at the NCC.

Who was going to the Military Bases or “Safe Havens” in Phase I?

- Afghans with an array of different legal statuses stayed at Safe Havens in Phase I – SIVs in all stages of the application pipeline; derivatives of SIVs; extended family members of SIVs and SIV-eligibles; U.S. lawful permanent residents; and primarily, humanitarian parolees.

What processing was done at the Safe Havens?

- Post Chief-of-Mission approved SIVs were able to file I-485s.
- All medical processing (vaccinations, examinations) was conducted, unless already done so at Lily-Pads.
- EADs and Social Security cards (SSC) were filed, but not adjudicated on site. EAD and SSC processing were severely delayed because, among other things, names and identifying numbers were riddled with errors.

The Lily-Pads

Prior to arrival at the NCC, Afghan evacuees have been in “Lily-Pad” countries where conditions range drastically. Some have been awaiting relocation to the U.S. from the Lily-Pad for almost eight months. The majority of evacuated Afghans ended up at Camp Al Sayliyah (CAS), a former U.S. army base located in a suburb of Doha, Qatar. Those who stayed at CAS have reported dire conditions – evacuees were essentially warehoused in giant rooms without air-conditioning with few restroom and shower facilities, and without access to sufficient nourishment or water. The Pentagon acknowledged these conditions in late August, and made some strides to improve them, but according to NCC staff members, Afghans coming from CAS express gratitude for the cleanliness, the comfortability, and the care taken at NCC in comparison to their experience in Doha. Similar reports have been made about the conditions of holding sites in the United Arab Emirates.

Conversely, a few thousand Afghan evacuees were initially sent to Albania, where the U.S. government had made deals with multiple beach resort facilities to temporarily house them. While these luxe resorts are a great departure from the warehousing conditions in Doha, the Associated Press recently reported that more than a third of Afghans relocated to Albania between August and September 2021 remain there. On June 1st, a few hundred Afghans held a protest over the failure of the U.S. to expedite their relocation – most of the protestors have been in Albania for nearly 10 months. The U.S. government has alleged that part of the delay is a product of the “full processing” having to take place on all Lily-Pad sites, but seemingly only Chief of Mission approvals and I-360s are getting filed there for Afghans in the SIV process, and only biometric and vetting information is being gathered for Afghan parolees.

Moving forward, the Department of State has said that all Afghans that came to a Lily-Pad after November 5th, 2021, who are not eligible for an SIV will be processed as refugees through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. This means that **all** relevant processing will be conducted at the Lily-Pad sites, including assurance to a resettlement agency, prior to arrival in the United States, and this population will not go

through the NCC. The Department of State has reported that the refugee processing of this population will be expedited.

Challenges and Recommendations

Challenge: *Post-Chief of Mission approval SIVs are not able to use the legal support provided at the NCC to file and process I-485 Adjustment of Status forms on site. Legal staff at NCC initially assumed that this service would be provided there, as it was on the Safe Havens, so assisted 47 SIVs in the first NCC cohort in filling out their I-485s. However, USCIS has not adjudicated them. They are currently still on hold in the NCC legal office, and the Afghans to whom they belong are currently at their final destinations, thinking that their Green Cards are being processed. USCIS has not provided a legitimate reason for the cessation of processing I-485s at intermediary sites.*

Recommendation: USCIS must process I-485s for all post-Chief of Mission approval SIVs at the NCC, and immediately adjudicate the 47 applications that have already been prepared.

Challenge: *There are communication breakdowns between the Lily-Pads and service providers at the NCC, and service providers and resettlement staff. These breakdowns exist in the form of incomplete case files, lack of database utilization, and general coordination issues. Without robust communication between service providers at each stage of the operation, it is difficult to administer consistent care and protection to Afghans while moving from place to place and attempting to settle into stable lives.*

Recommendation: U.S. government employees on Lily-Pads must begin filing and keeping comprehensive case notes in Hummingbird (database of Afghan cases) so that both the NCC and resettlement staff have access to the entirety of the case information. Resettlement case workers must ensure they are aware of and able to receive any sensitive case information from NCC providers – this is especially important for behavioral and mental health, where there are additional barriers to information sharing due to HIPPA regulations, and encrypted messaging may be required. Additionally, there must be a more robust effort among resettlement service providers to communicate with NCC staff about difficult cases, and a complementary effort from NCC service providers to reach out to resettlement staff once a difficult case is assured.