After Our Allies Were Welcomed:

Chronicling the Afghan Resettlement Response Since 2021

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USCRI

A Note of Gratitude:

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Methodology

This report is based on dozens of interviews conducted by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants' Policy and Advocacy Team on an intermittent basis between May 2022 and August 2023.

USCRI Policy Analyst Aaron Nodjomian-Escajeda was the report's lead researcher and author. USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar provided additional writing and editing. Ellen Mueller, who worked with the Policy and Advocacy Team in 2022, provided additional research. Additional design support for this report was provided by USCRI Associate Director of Communications Kelci Sleeper and USCRI Communications Officer Harriet Sinclair.

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Executive Summary

For several frenzied weeks in the summer of 2021, Americans watched in horror as the Taliban overran Afghanistan's governing institutions that United States military, diplomatic, and developmental power had supported for almost 20 years. The Afghan capital of Kabul was seized by the Taliban on August 15, 2021, as the extremist group returned to power across the country. The last American troops left Hamid Karzai International Airport by August 31, 2021. After the initial shock of images from the airport in Kabul faded, national attention on Afghanistan eventually waned.

But the work was just beginning in the United States' refugee resettlement field. In a matter of weeks, a sector gutted by record-low refugee admissions and the COVID-19 pandemic responded to a massive crisis and relocation effort with little modern precedent. More than 100,000 Afghan nationals were evacuated in the largest airlift in United States history. Refugee resettlement agencies, community service organizations, and volunteers worked with federal partners to welcome and process tens of thousands of Afghans at sites across the country before they resettled in communities nationwide.

This report chronicles some of those experiences from the perspective of one of the resettlement agencies, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI).

It provides an inside look at how USCRI resettlement staff responded to client needs in health care, psychosocial support, case management, and initial resettlement. The sections of this report document the logistic and bureaucratic hurdles that emerged from a rapidly established operating environment on the military bases receiving Afghan evacuees. It shares the stories of Afghans themselves who were resettled, their perspectives, and their ongoing work to serve others in their new chapter in the United States.

Despite the resilience of Afghan newcomers and the efforts of organizations around the country, Afghan resettlement and integration continues to face obstacles— to the detriment of Afghans in their new homes. The trauma of August 2021 lives on for unaccompanied Afghan minors and the Afghan parolee population at large. The legal system to stay in lawful status and remain work authorized remains fraught with challenges for Afghans and the legal service providers representing them. Permanent pathways for relocated Afghans and those who were left behind remain ineffectual relative to ongoing needs. The report draws attention to these past and ongoing challenges affecting Afghan resettlement, notes lessons learned from the last two years, and makes a series of policy recommendations in response as part of USCRI's ongoing legislative and administrative advocacy, including:

- Passage and implementation of the Afghan Adjustment Act
- Redesignation and extension of Afghanistan for Temporary Protected Status
- Reforms to increase refugee processing for Afghans, particularly in Pakistan
- Expanded U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) access to circuit rides for asylum interviews
- Adherence to USCIS policy on medical examination requirements for Afghan clients
- Passage of the Afghan Allies Protection Act to reform the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Afghans
- More consistent parole policies for Afghans arriving at the southern border

Introduction

The U.S. refugee resettlement system in 2021 was a sector in recovery.

Only 11,814 refugees were resettled in the United States in the federal government's 2020 fiscal year, marking a record low for a system in place since 1980. Years of falling refugee admissions under lower Presidential Determinations *[see Figure 1]* decreased the capacity of organizations nationwide to accept refugees and other individuals fleeing violence. In hindsight, even a system at peak capacity would have struggled to handle what was to come.

After taking office in January 2021, President Biden and his administration expressed a desire to rebuild the country's refugee resettlement system. However, admission rates remained low throughout the course of 2021— although a new admissions ceiling of 62,500 had been set through an emergency Presidential Determination after the change in administration.[1] Refugee processing continued to face headwinds from the COVID-19 pandemic— as U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) acknowledged that "COVID-19 restrictions, fiscal issues, a hiring freeze, and other factors have greatly exacerbated processing delays and backlogs, and placed burdens on applicants and petitioners."[2]

As such, a diminished refugee admissions program and a low number of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders admitted in the first half of 2021 had resulted in a system under stress by the summer months. "These were the conditions and the hard reality going into Afghan resettlement in 2021," USCRI Senior Vice President AnnaMarie Bena said.

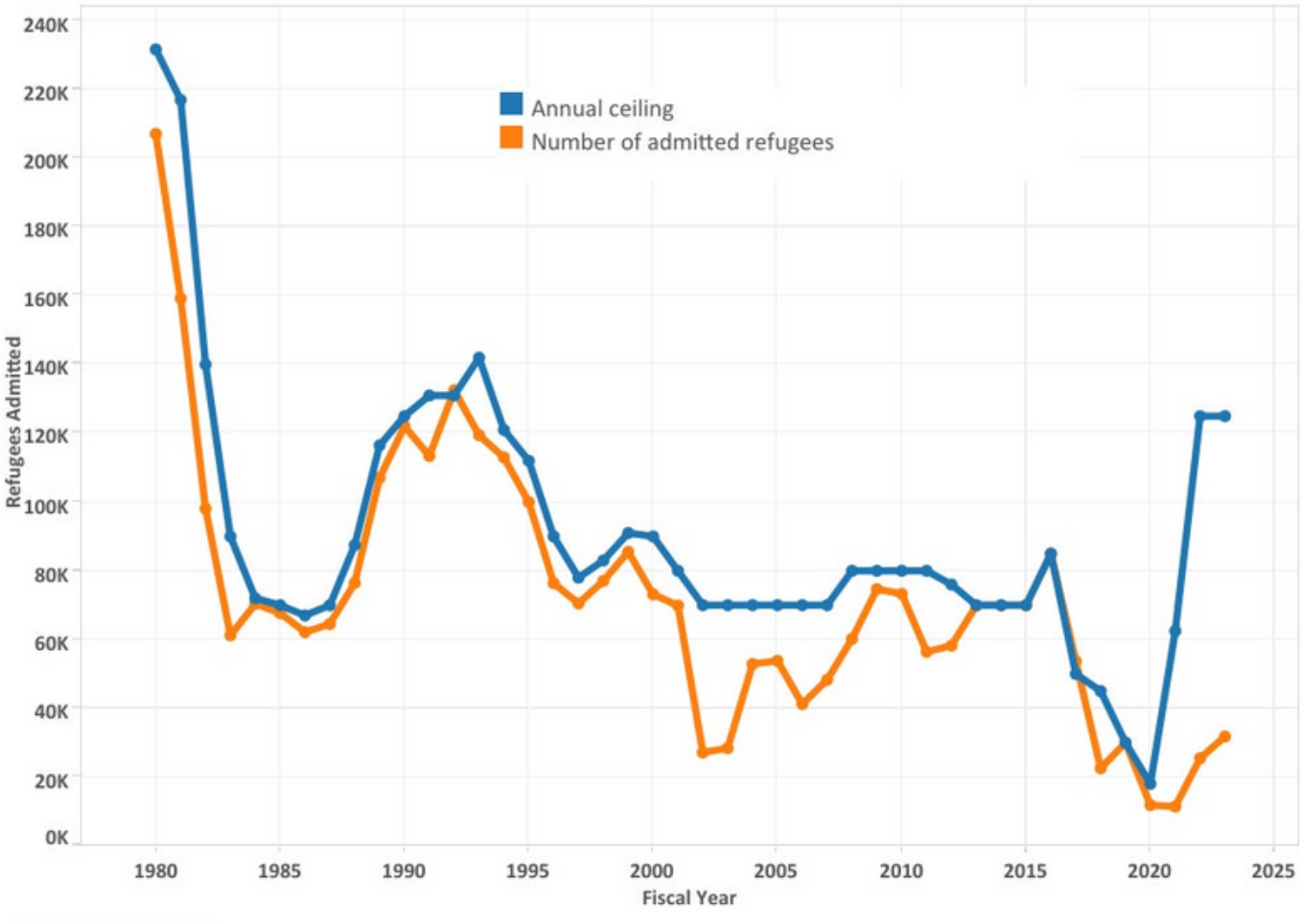
In a matter of weeks, an Afghan government supported by nearly two decades of United States military, diplomatic, and developmental power collapsed and withered before an onslaught by the Taliban. The U.S. government pulled together a massive non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) to relocate more than 100,000 Afghans out of the country. Tens of thousands of them arrived in the United States shortly thereafter.

From the rapid evacuation of Afghans during and after the Taliban takeover, an unprecedented emergency response effort from all U.S. refugee resettlement agencies was required. **This report chronicles some of those experiences from the perspective of one of the resettlement agencies, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI).**

It provides an inside look at how USCRI resettlement staff and donors responded to client needs in health care, psychosocial support, case management, and initial resettlement in what staff called a "chaotic and stressful" environment. It documents the logistic and bureaucratic hurdles that emerged from a rapidly established operating environment on domestic military bases receiving Afghan evacuees. It shares the stories of Afghans themselves who were resettled, their experiences and perspectives, and their ongoing work to serve others in their new chapter in the United States. The report concludes with lessons learned and policy recommendations to enhance protections for Afghans in the United States and those remaining in Afghanistan and third countries.

Before it addresses the work remaining, however, it must address why at-risk Afghans needed refuge in the United States in the first place.

Figure 1: U.S. Refugee Admission and Refugee Resettlement Ceilings, from Fiscal Year 1980 to Fiscal Year 2023, year-to-date, according to the Migration Policy Institute[3]



A Withdrawal Announced and Intra-Afghan Talks Crumble

By 2020, the war in Afghanistan beginning in 2001 had cost tens of thousands of civilian lives. The American and coalition presence in the country spanned three— and, eventually, four— U.S. presidential administrations, costing the United States more than $2 trillion and the lives of more than 2,300 service members. After more than a decade of extensive security sector support, the Afghan central government remained unable to extend its reach to much of the countryside, which remained under the control of the Taliban and other armed groups.

In February 2020, the Trump administration agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, on the condition that the Taliban negotiated a peace agreement with the Afghan central government and made assurances to prevent terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State from solidifying a presence in the country.[4] Intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha, Qatar between representatives of the Taliban and the Afghan central government commenced in September 2020, but they never gained prominent headway.

Although the incoming Biden administration also committed to scaling down and withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan, it recognized that the May 1 deadline would be difficult to meet. In April 2021, President Biden committed to a new deadline— September 11, 2021— to complete the withdrawal.[5]

The first three months of 2021 were marked by increased Taliban attacks against Afghan government forces, according to a Department of Defense Office of Inspector General (DOD OIG) quarterly report.[6] Intelligence estimates began to assess it was becoming increasingly unlikely the Afghan government would be able to hold off the Taliban when U.S. and coalition forces were to withdraw— although the timing remained under debate. U.S. officials were directed to prepare for a potential withdrawal of all U.S. personnel, including contingencies involving a rapidly deteriorating security situation.[7] In this context, military planners began preparing for the possibility of a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO).

As the Taliban felt emboldened and scaled up their attacks, President Biden moved up the timeline for full withdrawal to August 31, 2021, stating that "speed is safety."[8]

The Launch of OAR and the First Flights

As the summer progressed, so did the urgency to withdraw U.S. personnel and Afghan citizens who were at risk because of their work for the U.S. government and civil society. On July 14, 2021, the Biden administration launched Operation Allies Refuge (OAR) to support relocation flights for Afghan nationals eligible for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) through their employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government, as well as their families.[9] Running concurrently with the larger U.S. military withdrawal, OAR was organized to airlift from Afghanistan certain at-risk Afghan civilians, particularly interpreters, U.S. embassy employees, and other prospective SIV applicants.

As part of OAR, the Department of State (State) held conversations with third countries about the possibility of temporary relocations for these individuals. It also considered the use of military bases in the United States. On July 15, 2021, Fort Lee in Virginia received notification that it would support OAR by providing temporary housing, medical screenings, food, and religious and cultural support to certain SIV applicants.[10] Around 220 Afghan interpreters arrived at Fort Lee on July 30, the first group of Afghan arrivals to come to the United States.

The United States struggled to balance preparing for worst-case scenarios while seeking not to undermine confidence in the Afghan government and Afghan forces' will to fight. "Whenever a government is threatened with the prospect of collapse— whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere— there is an obvious tension between signaling confidence in the capabilities of the current government and providing warning of risks that it might fail," according to a National Security Council report from April 2023.[11]

While the U.S. government continued to withdraw and relocate civilians through OAR, the Taliban's momentum against Afghan forces grew with unrelenting speed. On August 6, 2021, the capital of Nimruz province in southwestern Afghanistan fell to the Taliban. In a matter of days, the Taliban captured provincial capitals across the country, including major urban centers such as Kunduz, Kandahar, and Herat. With Kabul coming under direct threat on August 13 and 14, President Biden formally initiated the NEO and ordered the deployment of additional troops to support what was now an evacuation effort.[12]

Chaos at Hamid Karzai International Airport

The fall of Kabul, as it came to be known, occurred swiftly. Defenses around the capital were quickly overrun— and the Taliban captured the city on August 15, 2021. Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul found itself inundated with civilians desperately trying to leave the country. With Bagram Air Base previously handed over to the Afghan government, the airport was the only exit point for the NEO out of Afghanistan.

The United States announced on August 15 it was taking steps to complete the NEO out of the airport, including expanding its presence to nearly 6,000 troops and taking over air traffic control.[13] "Afghans who have cleared security screening will continue to be transferred directly to the United States," according to a joint State and DOD statement. "And we will find additional locations for those yet to be screened."

In anticipation of the large number of evacuees, the U.S. government established so-called Lily Pads throughout the Middle East and Europe to temporarily house evacuated Afghans. These sites were military installations that served as staging areas for Afghans on the way to the United States *[see Figure 2]* after their departure from Kabul.

The second half of August was a non-stop, around-the-clock sprint for those trying to get onto evacuation flights and those helping them. Civilians around the world worked to help Afghan loved ones, friends, former colleagues, and others onto evacuation flights.

Sara Lowry, who was a USCRI staff attorney at the time, advocated for the safe evacuation of four children of an Afghan woman, Suneeta, who had resettled in the Albany, New York, area.[14] Even when successful, the process to evacuate Afghans during the NEO was an emotional gauntlet— involving dozens of calls and emails to navigate bureaucracy and work with strangers across time zones, all with the highest stakes possible.

On August 26, 2021, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device at Abbey Gate outside the airport, killing 13 American service members and 170 Afghans. After the attack, President Biden consulted with senior military officials on whether to end the NEO immediately— but was advised that "the threat to U.S. forces was manageable and to continue until August 31 to maximize the evacuations of Americans, allied forces, and Afghan partners."[15]

The evacuation officially ended on August 31, 2021. "It was the largest airlift in United States history and it was conducted in 17 days," Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin later testified.[16]

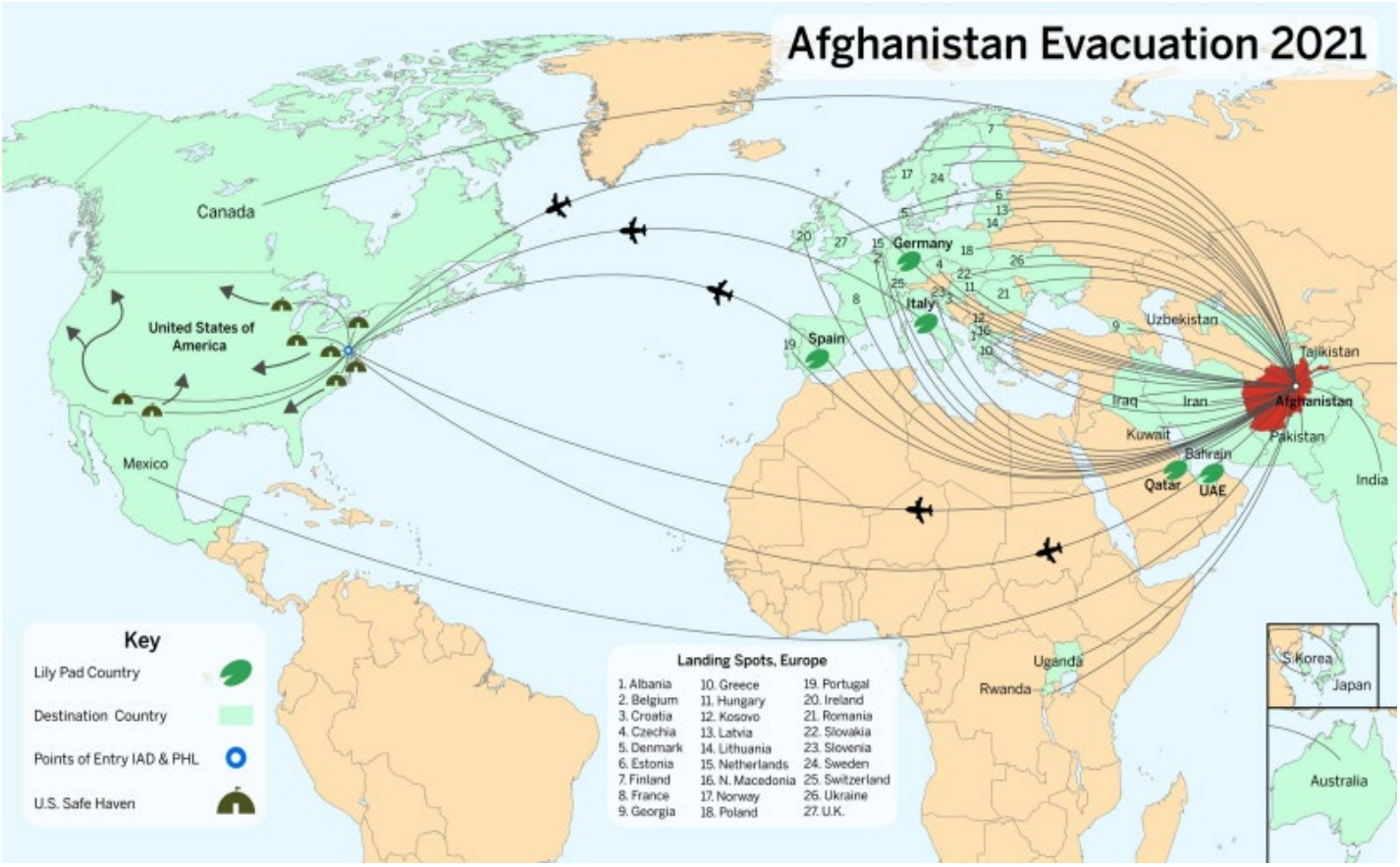
OAW Commences— with a Reliance on Parole

On August 29, 2021, two weeks after the start of the evacuation and two days before it officially ended, the Biden administration directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to lead the ongoing efforts to provide temporary housing and support inside the United States for evacuees. These coordinated efforts became known as Operation Allies Welcome (OAW).

Temporary housing expanded beyond Fort Lee, Virginia, which had assisted the original 220 interpreters, to include seven other installations– Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia; Fort Pickett, Virginia; Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico; Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; Fort Bliss, Texas; Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey; and Camp Atterbury, Indiana. Later called "Safe Havens," these bases provided wraparound services, including initial processing and screening, COVID-19 testing and care, vaccinations, and additional medical services.

While some evacuees had been issued SIVs, the majority of Afghan nationals brought to the United States did not have another immigration status upon their arrival.[17] The U.S. government thus resorted to other immigration channels to welcome Afghan evacuees to American soil, namely immigration parole. Used for decades and codified in immigration law, parole is a mechanism that grants a foreign national entry and admission into the United States without a visa.[18] When they were processed by federal officials in the United States, Afghans were granted humanitarian parole under Section 212(d)(5) of the Immigration and Nationality Act— often for a period of two years. However, a grant of humanitarian parole is not itself an official immigration status and does not have a connection to a permanent immigration pathway— a downside of parole authority that posed challenges described elsewhere in this report.

Figure 2: The movement of Afghan evacuees in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, according to the American Foreign Service Association. A destination country is one that received any number of Afghan evacuees in 2021.[19]



Afghan Special Immigrant Visas

Why was parole needed for the evacuation? The beleaguered Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program provides part of the answer.

Section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 is a special immigrant program which authorizes the issuance of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) to Afghan nationals who meet certain requirements, including a year of employment on behalf of the U.S. government.[20]

With a process bifurcated between the Department of State and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the SIV program has faced backlog and eligibility challenges for years. These problems were particularly prominent in the final year of the Trump administration and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the Department of State suspended routine visa services at all U.S. embassies and consulates, which severely limited their capacity to process SIVs. A remarkably low number of SIVs were issued in parts of 2020.

Longer wait times were also a consequence of COVID-19. The processing timeline for SIVs is meant to be nine months. But, in the 15 months leading up to the evacuation, issuing an SIV took nearly 26 months on average. Delays are mostly attributed to the step in which the Chief of Mission (COM) Committee reviews the application and decides to approve or deny it.

The processing delays for SIVs had consequences during the NEO. If applications had been processed in a timely manner, thousands of Afghans would likely have been able to have been processed through SIVs— which contains a path to permanent residency— rather than being granted parole.

Safe Havens, the domestic military bases initially used for arriving Afghans, were launched in a matter of weeks as Afghans departed Kabul. During Phase I of OAW, the period immediately following the evacuation, various military bases across the country were established and staffed to process the influx of evacuees. This phase lasted from August 29, 2021, until February 18, 2022— when the last Afghan departed the Safe Havens.

During OAW and through the Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) Program, the federal government called upon nonprofit agencies and community partners to resettle and provide benefits to more than 78,000 Afghan evacuees in locations across the country.

Arrivals from the Lily Pads

In Phase I, Afghans were brought either directly from Afghanistan to one of the domestic Safe Havens, or to a Lily Pad, a site in a third country where some Afghans waited for paperwork to be processed before coming to the United States. The U.S. government also used the National Conference Center in Virginia as an intermediary site for evacuees between their stay at a Lily Pad and their final resettlement destination in the United States.

At the Lily Pads, in coordination with the Departments of Defense and State, the Department of Homeland Security conducted the processing, screening, and vetting of Afghan nationals who worked for the United States, as well as other vulnerable Afghans. Of the Lily Pad sites, most evacuees were sent to Qatar at Camp Al Sayliyah (CAS), a former U.S. Army base located in a suburb of Doha. Those who stayed at CAS in the initial days of the evacuation reported dire conditions, such as being warehoused in giant rooms without air conditioning, few restrooms and shower facilities, and a lack of access to sufficient nourishment, water, or health care.

The Pentagon acknowledged these conditions in late August and made some strides to improve them. However, according to staff members at the National Conference Center (NCC), Afghans coming from CAS expressed gratitude for the cleanliness, comfortability, and care provided at Safe Havens in comparison to their experience at CAS.

USCRI's Refugee Health Services (RHS) was tasked with expanding their existing Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA) program to cover emergency medical needs at the Safe Havens. "We had 24 hours' notice to prepare for 2,500 Afghan SIVs," USCRI Director of Refugee Health Services Gursimran Grewal recalled. "That's how we started and then within a few short weeks, as things in Kabul started getting worse, we were asked to provide a plan for 40,000 Afghan evacuees over a weekend." This projected number was ultimately lower than the nearly 80,000 Afghans who were evacuated and resettled in the United States during the initial phase of this process.

Grewal said that continuity of care was difficult in these conditions where, "in some cases, critical pieces of information were missing to provide adequate care, specifically related to mental health." In others, "it was not flagged that guests had been on psychotropic medication, which can cause problems if someone is running out of medication— they're not accessing care," Grewal said.

Snags in Processing

Processing challenges were also present at Safe Havens. Virginia Weyer, who is now USCRI's Associate Director of Resettlement, recalled that, "Initially, processing at Safe Havens was done in shared Excel files, and there was no biodata that resettlement agencies could upload into their own systems." Hummingbird, a custom-built application, was quickly created and used by the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) to assist with initial screening, vetting, and management of case information, applicant biodata, and resettlement assistance.[21]

Weyer said that "the individuals doing processing on bases did not have experience in resettlement," so there were many difficulties in using Hummingbird. A major concern with Hummingbird reported by USCRI staff was that the database did not separate U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident (LPR) family members from noncitizen Afghan family members, which caused mixed-status families to be processed together and receive services. As a result, resettlement agencies provided services to some individuals who would have been otherwise ineligible. Others inadvertently received services from the wrong program for Afghan evacuees. Weyer noted that, "some cases included SIV applicants that were eligible for Reception & Placement (R&P) services but inadvertently were served under the Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) Program" because there was a lack of clarity among resettlement staff regarding eligibility for different services.

More than a year after initial enrollments were completed, these difficulties still presented challenges through the reconciliation of medical claims and resettlement services. Additionally, glitches caused client casefiles to disappear from Hummingbird temporarily or show different information for clients when different staff would access the same case file, which created difficulties verifying information between sites and delaying some enrollments.

Mirroring experiences of other refugee and immigrant populations, some Afghans received important documentation with their names spelled incorrectly. For example, family names were spelled differently between Social Security documents and Employment Authorization Documents (EADs). Additionally, names in Hummingbird would differ from identification documents. These errors delayed otherwise eligible Afghans from accessing employment, benefits, and services while the documents were corrected by the relevant government agencies. In many cases, individuals had a fourth name that was not included on new documents. To rectify this, a lengthy process matching original documents with picture IDs and new documentation was followed by resettlement staff. If the client could not produce a picture ID, some states would not issue an ID card, without which they would be unable to apply for benefits. USCRI and other resettlement agency staff reported that it took months to manage some of these corrections.

Afghan Placement and Assistance Program Established

Of the thousands of Afghans who entered the United States, the majority were granted parole, which does not normally come with access to federal mainstream benefits or those provided through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). After the passage of the Fiscal Year 2022 Continuing Resolution in September 2021, however, Afghan humanitarian parolees were made eligible for benefits through the Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) Program, which provided immediate resettlement assistance to newly arrived Afghans.[22]

Following a similar model to the Reception & Placement (R&P) program in the traditional refugee admissions system, APA provided Afghan parolees with relocation services for 30 to 90 days after arrival. These services were provided through refugee resettlement agencies, such as USCRI, that receive a one-time per capita amount of $2,275 from PRM, a portion of which goes to fund basic needs such as housing, food, clothing, and furnishings.[23] Other services include cultural orientation, English language services, access to legal services, and referrals as needed. These parolees also received access to ORR programs like Matching Grant or Preferred Communities[i], Refugee Cash and Medical Assistance, and Refugee Support Services, as well as access to federal assistance programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), when applicable.[24]

These mechanisms have supported the successful resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees in the United States since the beginning of the refugee program enacted through the Refugee Act of 1980. However, the relocation of Afghan newcomers was significantly complicated by the rushed process and systems implemented in a fast-moving environment, as well as Afghans' classification as humanitarian parolees instead of refugees.

USCRI staff reported that many Afghans chose to depart Safe Havens independently and prematurely rather than wait to be enrolled in APA. In those instances, cases were often not updated correctly. Individuals remained eligible for APA if they contacted a local affiliate offering services to request assistance within 90 days of their departure from a Safe Haven. This trend presented challenges when Afghans self-presented at resettlement agencies where assurances[ii] and arrival numbers differed. USCRI staff also mentioned that "when people left without it being documented by the Safe Haven's staff correctly, it would mess up assurances and housing plans with affiliates." When fewer Afghans arrived than expected, affiliates remained responsible for paying for the hotel rooms or housing units that they had pre-arranged.

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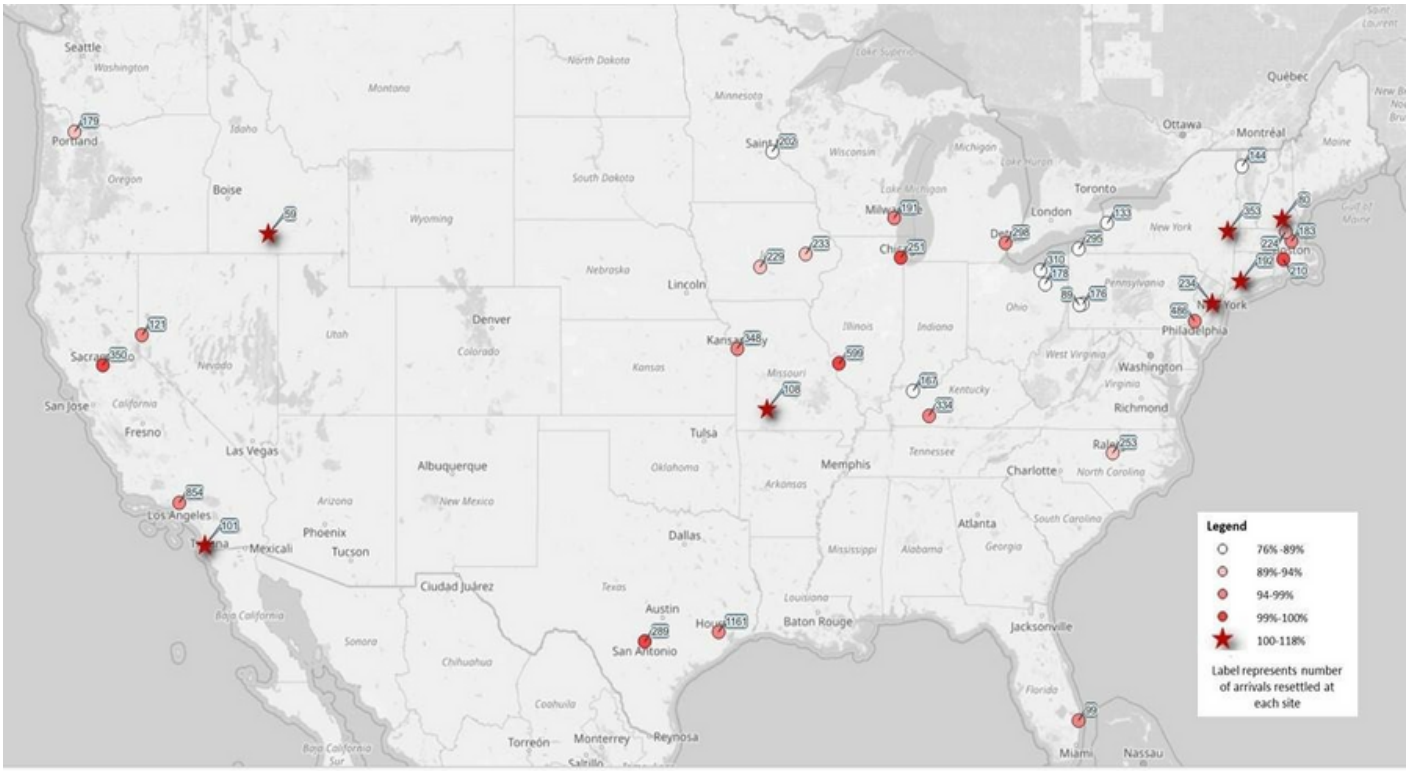
[i] Matching Grant (MG) helps refugees and other ORR-eligible populations become economically self-sufficient by overcoming barriers to employment through services such as case management, employment skills training, job referrals, and family budget planning. Preferred Communities (PC) provides long-term case management and other services and interventions for particularly vulnerable refugee populations, such as those with disabilities, those with other medical conditions, or those without a family support system.

[ii] A resettlement agency's assurance for a refugee confirms that they are willing and prepared to accept the case for resettlement and will make all necessary arrangements at the local level to receive the refugee. Once an assurance is received by the refugee processing post, travel arrangements can be made.

At the beginning of OAW Phase I, USCRI staff mostly discontinued the resettlement of other populations to dedicate their time to Afghan parolees. Also, as noted above, the number of refugees arriving at that time was low. At the peak of the COVID-19 Delta variant, resettlement staff around the country worked on assuring arrivals and transfer requests and were out in the field welcoming Afghans at airports, giving rides to appointments, and arranging suitable housing.

For its part, USCRI's network *[see Figure 3]* went above its capacity by resettling a total of 9,713 Afghans across 36 different sites in Phase I. The lowest capacity site during Phase I was Colchester, Vermont, hitting 76 percent, whereas USCRI's partner agency in Twin Falls, Idaho, resettled 118 percent of its capacity. Twin Falls was one of seven USCRI sites that surpassed 100 percent of their capacity and assurances during Phase I. USCRI staff reported that Afghans sought to resettle near family members already residing in the United States or where larger populations of Afghans already lived, such as Sacramento, California; Fairfax County, Virginia; and Houston, Texas.

Figure 3: USCRI Afghan resettlement sites, the number of arrivals at each site, and the arrival rate.[iii]



[iii] The arrival rate is the number of arrivals divided by the capacity of a given site.

Resettlement Stories

Beyond the numbers and technical aspects of OAR and OAW are individuals with hopes, dreams, and families. Some of their stories are represented here.

Two Times a Refugee

Mirwais Muqbil arrived in the United States in September 2021 after being evacuated from Afghanistan. Prior to the withdrawal, he had been working at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul for almost six years. He was first screened at a Lilly Pad in Qatar, where he spent one night. He was then airlifted to Germany, where he spent more than two weeks at Ramstein Air Base before flying to the Washington, D.C. area. He was then transferred to Marine Corps Base Quantico, where he spent more than two months before arriving in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was resettled by USCRI in November 2021.

This is the second time that Muqbil has been a refugee. During civil conflict in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, he fled with his family to seek safety in neighboring Pakistan. Upon arrival, they lived in a refugee camp for four months in the intense summer heat. Muqbil compared that experience to his 2021 evacuation during a 2022 World Refugee Day event hosted by USCRI.[25] He stated that the transportation, housing, food, and overall evacuation and resettlement process went smoothly and that he feels blessed, as opposed to his experience as a child in Pakistan, recalling that he would sometimes not be able to shower for a month.

Muqbil joined USCRI as a Community Support Specialist as he resettled into his new community.

Crafts to Supplement Income

USCRI staff from the Erie, Pennsylvania field office told the research team of two clients who received job training after their evacuation from Afghanistan:

> *"Two women wanted a supplemental source of income for their large families. One woman joked that while her sister chose to learn English while on the army base, she chose to spend her time crocheting and honing her craft. She felt a little bashful about it— like her sister's language skill was more marketable than hers. But we were able to connect her (and her aunt) to our agricultural program coordinator who attends local farmer's market— one of which includes a lot of other craft vendors. For a month over the summer, these women (with a program manager) went to farmer's markets and sold handmade, crocheted items— one speaking to customers and the other selling her crafts. This not only provided the family with a supplemental source of income, but more importantly helped the women gain confidence and pride in their strengths and skills. Staff were also able to solicit donations for yarn— so the women had plenty of materials to work with."*

Resettlement Stories (Cont.)

From Evacuee to Volunteer

Another story from USCRI Erie recounts a young woman's journey to becoming a volunteer following the evacuation:

> *"Arriving in one of the first groups of evacuees from Afghanistan, Haieda Sharifi started working with USCRI Erie as a volunteer, an interpreter, and now as a case manager. Before she arrived in the United States, Haieda was studying law and political science at Kabul University, where she also learned English. In her new role at USCRI Erie, Haieda helps women with medical appointments, preparing for driving tests, and helping families to navigate the local schools while they are still learning English. She encourages all Americans to be patient with refugees as they are adjusting to their new country. 'Our cultures are different, but we are learning,' she says."*

Dedicated to Full Service

After four unsuccessful attempts, a 21-year-old Afghan woman managed to board a plane in Kabul and was flown to a Lily Pad in Spain. She arrived in Cleveland, Ohio in late November 2021, through the USCRI Cleveland field office when it was resettling close to 80 individuals per week. With the help of USCRI, she now has a job and an apartment and assists her community as a volunteer interpreter.

There are thousands of other success stories of Afghans resettling into their new communities. Other stories include the success of the USCRI partner agency in Houston, which was able to house 99 percent of Afghans in permanent housing within 3 months of arrival; USCRI's affiliate in Highland Park, New Jersey leasing a housing complex that provided consistent rotating housing for Afghans; and sites in Connecticut helping college-student evacuees return to school by offering school supplies and other support as well as partnering with local colleges.

Community Partnerships

Communities across the United States, individual donors, and foundations came together to assist relocations during Phase I of OAW. At USCRI, donations were used to address specific needs of Afghans in their new communities.

In February 2022, USCRI received a $5 million donation from an anonymous donor to help fund the rapid expansion of services offered to Afghans. This generous donation helped launch the Transforming Afghan Lives (TAL) Program. This program expanded legal services; increased access to technology, including Chromebooks and other devices; provided Internet connections to Afghan clients; and delivered assistance to Afghan women and children. Partially funded by the TAL Program, USCRI opened six new offices in the Denver, Colorado; Atlanta, Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; Austin and Dallas, Texas; and Richmond, Virginia areas to focus on Afghan legal services. The donation is set to fund the TAL Program through February 21, 2024.

Additionally, USCRI received a grant worth $349,000 from the Welcome Fund, an initiative of Welcome.US to support Afghan resettlement efforts— specifically housing. “We are very grateful to Welcome.US for this generous award,” USCRI President and CEO Eskinder Negash said. “We appreciate their support as we worked to meet the housing needs of thousands of Afghan arrivals.” Other resettlement agencies have received similar grants and private donations like these.

Beyond the contributions of big donors, countless individuals in communities throughout the country came together to support this effort. USCRI field office staff and volunteers worked with local and state partners to secure housing, clothing, food, and furniture. They helped coordinate efforts to raise funds, deliver groceries, donate furniture and other household items, provide transportation, and host and support Afghan families. Some partners provided culturally appropriate food boxes, grocery store gift cards, and home-cooked meals.

Local USCRI field offices were critical in garnering funds and community support for newly arrived Afghans. This is a non-exhaustive list of the types of support that USCRI field offices received to support Afghan arrivals:

- A regional supermarket chain awarded USCRI Vermont a $20,000 grant to help launch the Afghan Women’s and Children’s Empowerment Initiative.
- USCRI Des Moines raised more than $50,000 in a single Welcoming Iowa event to support Afghan arrivals.
- USCRI Erie received an award of $50,000 from Open Society Foundations to support Afghan resettlement.
- USCRI Dearborn received a $21,500 proactive grant from the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan for general support related to Afghan clients.
- USCRI Albany received a $15,000 donation from a local foundation to support Afghan arrivals.
- USCRI North Carolina was awarded a two-year, $254,000 equity and development grant to provide computers, childcare, classes, vocational training, and youth activities for Afghan women and their families.

An Evolving Medical Response

Caring for the health of newly arrived Afghans and addressing their acute and chronic health needs was an enormous undertaking. USCRI Director of Refugee Health Services Gursimran Grewal said the health care response in the first phase of OAW felt like a "24/7 job… almost to December 2021."

The frantic evacuation of Kabul had created acute medical needs for the Afghans who arrived at Safe Havens. "Nearly every Afghan was dehydrated or had some other complication, thus pushing emergency rooms (ER) beyond their capacity," Grewal recalled. "There were babies being born probably every second of the flight or at the airports while being transported out." In addition to language and cultural barriers, the health care component of the evacuation occurred in the context of a peak in the COVID-19 pandemic with the Delta variant, which already strained hospital systems. Additionally, large numbers of evacuees, staffing limitations, and time constraints further complicated the feasibility of submitting Medicaid applications to quickly secure health and prescription coverage for Afghan evacuees.

An interagency agreement between ORR and PRM organized a health and prescription coverage model for Afghan evacuees with funding from the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) Fund.[26] However, supplemental funding from the Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022 (ASA) paved the way for Afghan parolees to receive resettlement assistance, including ORR-funded medical care and health services. As such, funding for the health and prescription coverage model shifted to ORR on October 1, 2021.

The standard of care evolved over the course of the response to the crisis. During the initial evacuation period, from July 31, 2021, to September 30, 2021, health services were limited to meeting emergency "life and limb preserving" care and treatment. Over time, with expanded funding authority through the ASA and increased wait times for Afghans staying at Safe Havens, services widened for broader health coverage, which included access to emergency room visits, hospital admissions, dental care, durable medical equipment, prescriptions, and specialty care services.

Most of the Safe Havens in Phase I had DOD contractors who delivered limited medical care. ORR funded USCRI to operate the Off-site Health Benefits and Save Havens program to provide medical and pharmacy benefits when needs for care exceeded the level of care provided at Safe Haven clinics. USCRI operated the program through its third-party administrator, Point Comfort Underwriters (PCU).[27]

The patchwork of different entities providing medical services in the aftermath of the evacuation caused complications later. Grewal stated that, "people were enrolled in the system without names, without anything, and went in network and out of network." She also explained that in some circumstances, there were "six different records for the same person and treatment."

USCRI and PCU worked long nights to manage and implement systems created in a short period of time, often without clear guidance. Grewal stated that, "no one really expected this to become the beast that it did— unmanageable at every level and to be expected to receive patients and billings like it has been running for years." [iv]

Ensuring cooperation from hospitals receiving Afghan clients for more severe conditions was also an obstacle. "I don't think anyone anticipated that the hospitals would push back," Grewal said. "A lot of the challenge was talking to hospital administration and getting them to accept clients."

During Phase I, more than 15,000 claims were filed to provide medical care to Afghans at Safe Havens, including more than 3,000 Afghans who received care at ERs. Roughly 1,300 Afghans received services at an outpatient or office setting, and 916 had claims for an inpatient stay. Smaller numbers received care at ambulatory surgical centers, urgent care sites, skilled nursing facilities, or received durable medical equipment.

While this model provided comprehensive wraparound medical care, it may have set up Afghans for unrealistic expectations for health care in the United States. Grewal recounted that "free prescriptions and fast care made the adjustment challenging for Afghans after leaving Safe Havens." This high standard of care set expectations that did not match the reality of the rest of the American health care system. "Wait times for doctor's visits and medication costs are so different from what they initially experienced," Grewal said.

Unaccompanied Afghan Minors

As evacuees began arriving on military bases, it became clear that many children had left Afghanistan without a parent or guardian. U.S. law stipulates that minors with no lawful immigration status in the United States without a parent or legal guardian are considered Unaccompanied Children (UC), even if they are being cared for by other family members.[28] This was often the case for these Afghan children.

More than 1,500 unaccompanied Afghan minors (UAM) were brought to the United States during the evacuation.[29] The majority of these UAMs were quickly released to live with sponsors, which included other family members fleeing Afghanistan or relatives already residing in the United States.

ORR has cared for thousands of UCs of all nationalities since 2003. However, the urgent onset nature of the evacuation left little time to prepare ORR facilities, which were accustomed to housing Central American children and teens. The COVID-19 pandemic created additional complications in managing these types of facilities.

Typically, arriving UCs are transferred to ORR care and custody while they await reunification with a parent or other sponsor. During this time, shelter care providers offer temporary housing and services, including educational, medical, and mental health services as well as case management to reunite children with their families. Because family unity is usually in a child's best interest, ORR processes UCs quickly and releases them to vetted

[iv] The creation of these systems is the equivalent to creating and running multiple Health Maintenance Organizations (HMO) over a span of a few weeks.

sponsors who may be parents, guardians, or other adult relatives. In the absence of an appropriate sponsor, UCs are placed in foster care or group homes. In times of system stress, ORR may operate other facilities, including influx facilities and— more recently— emergency intake sites.

Given the unique circumstances of UAMs at Safe Havens, ORR released Field Guidance #19 originally on September 4, 2021, with specific guidance about UAMs.[30] Originally, Field Guidance #19 clarified that UAMs met the technical definition of a UC because humanitarian parole is not a lawful immigration status. The guidance further detailed how UAMs differed from the typical UC referred to ORR because they:

• Were affirmatively evacuated by the United States Government (USG),
• Are paroled into the United States and the USG has permitted their lawful presence,
• Are processed under humanitarian parole and not immediately placed into removal proceedings, and
• May have arrived with a caregiver that has already been screened by DOD and State.

Field Guidance #19 was revised on November 9, 2021. Per the revised guidance, Afghan children arriving with other family members should not be considered UAMs and should not be transferred to UC providers unless it is deemed to be in the child's best interest. Those concerns are supposed to be evaluated when there is no caregiver accompanying the child or there are significant child welfare concerns with the accompanying caregiver.

As previously discussed, certain paroled Afghans became eligible for refugee and entrant benefits through ORR, which includes eligibility for the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) program. As such, paroled Afghan children are eligible for these benefits. Due to the limited capacity of the URM program, UAMs may receive care through ORR's network of service providers to UCs.

The impact of the changed field guidance meant that Afghan minors could remain with the trusted adult with whom they had evacuated. ORR was advised to release Afghan minors to the adult caregiver if the following conditions were met:

1. The identity of the Afghan minor and the caregiver were confirmed.
2. There was a prior bona fide relationship, and the caregiver was willing and able to provide for the child's physical and mental well-being.
3. ORR received proof of parole status or lawful immigration status of the adult caregiver.
4. The case did not present immediate red flags, such as trafficking concerns or if the child had special needs that the caregiver was unwilling or unable to provide for.
5. Applicable procedures, including required assessments of the Afghan minor and caregiver, were implemented.[31]

Any child who was not released to an adult caregiver was determined to be a UAM and transferred to ORR unaccompanied childcare providers. Nearly 190 UAMs were admitted by ORR through 41 facilities. Nearly all of the remaining UAMs without sponsors were teenage boys.

Shelters faced unprecedented challenges and struggled to respond to the trauma experienced by these young Afghans.[32] "Shelters were not adequately prepared to take Afghan children," Matt Haygood, USCRI Senior Director of Children's Services, said. Capacity was limited at these facilities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, available information and resources were primarily in Spanish, Haitian Creole, or various indigenous languages due to most UC populations originating from Central America, namely Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. A lack of appropriate resources and interpreters contributed to the negative well-being of UAMs in shelters.

Mental Health for UAMs

At the request of ORR, USCRI was one of the few organizations that was also called upon to provide behavioral and psychosocial support to unaccompanied Afghan minors. These services were provided by Afghan American behavioral and mental health specialists who spoke Dari and/or Pashto.

During Phase I, USCRI provided in-person, culturally responsive behavioral health and psychosocial support to UAMs at two shelters in Chicago, Illinois, and three shelters in Grand Rapids, Michigan. USCRI's support teams included community health workers and youth behavioral specialists who were Afghan American, spoke Dari and/or Pashto, and were trained in Psychological First Aid and Mental Health First Aid. The primary goal of these programs was to provide support services with the aim of assisting UAMs in developing the skills necessary to cope with the many challenges of living in a new country and ultimately empowering UAMs to thrive in American society.

"USCRI's team served as a cultural bridge between UAMs and both shelter and federal staff, assisting in mutual communication and understanding by mediating during misunderstandings and conflicts and providing cultural competency to staff and cultural orientations to UAMs," USCRI OAW Program Officer Berhan Gebretsadik said.

UAMs were provided with weekly individual support sessions conducted by USCRI. During these sessions, staff provided brief behavioral and psychosocial support interventions, educated UAMs about integration-related matters, and provided cultural orientation. Moreover, USCRI staff assisted UAMs in re-connecting with Afghan culture, assisted UAMs in developing necessary skills to resettle successfully into the United States, and connected UAMs to relevant resources. Weekly one-on-one sessions were also provided virtually by an Afghan American former doctor who served as a respected and trusted elder to the UAMs.

USCRI also conducted psycho-educational and recreational group sessions with UAMs multiple times a week. These groups were created in response to shelter staff requests and feedback. The groups aimed to mitigate the effects of family separation and loss, provide structure and support in a safe space, and address other unmet needs. UAMs were encouraged to talk openly and ask questions, as well as connect with Afghan cultural traditions and express themselves creatively through culturally appropriate art, music, and interactive activities.

"UAMs were extremely responsive to these sessions, especially goal setting during Ramadan, which was structured to connect the holy month of Ramadan to the importance of strengthening UAMs' relationships with Allah by living intentionally and setting goals for self- improvement," Gebretsadik said.

UAMs exhibited an array of mental and behavioral health issues, demonstrating symptoms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and conduct problems. Behavioral problems included defying rules and instructions, refusing to participate in activities, verbal and physical aggression, and destructive behaviors, such as non-suicidal self-injury and suicidal ideation. UAMs were also significantly worried and stressed about their inability to work or send money to their families in Afghanistan.

"UAMs have had a much harder time than other UCs," said Catharine Christie, who served as the USCRI Policy Analyst for UC issues in 2022. "They have very specific trauma. They were separated from their families at the Kabul airport, and in Afghan culture it is unheard of for children and parents to be separated." The Taliban's sudden assault on Kabul and the rushed evacuation meant that children were separated from their parents very quickly and unexpectedly. This experience differs from that of many UCs who intentionally make the journey to the United States without their parents.

Worse still, UAMs received mixed messages about family reunification which impacted their mental health. According to Christie, "child advocates and clinicians told kids that they would be reunited with their parents, but ORR was not communicating with them." As it became clear that reunifications were rare and taking much longer than anticipated, Afghan children were left wondering if and when they would ever be reunited with their parents, which intensified their mental health challenges.

Trafficking Concerns

Humanitarian disasters compound existing vulnerabilities that individuals, families, and communities face. Unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable to abuse, trafficking, and exploitation. UAMs are no exception. Soon after the arrival of Afghan children, USCRI staff who administered the Trafficking Victims Assistance Program (TVAP) stated they received reports of trafficking concerns. Haygood said that "there were instances of sexual abuse and child marriages. Service providers would arrive at communities and discover a 14-year-old girl married to an older man." Child marriage is common in Afghanistan— according to UNICEF estimates, 28 percent of Afghan women aged 15 to 49 were married before the age of 18.[33] As for how instances of trafficking slipped below the radar, USCRI staff cited the lack of rules and clarity of responsibility on the military bases. State Child Protective Services (CPS) did not have jurisdiction on the Safe Havens, which resulted in some abuses being discovered or rediscovered once CPS reviewed cases at the final resettlement destination.

At the time administered as part of TVAP and now in the purview of the program Aspire, program staff provide consultations to the Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) on whether a minor's case constitutes trafficking. After the evacuation, staff observed an increase in reports of possible cases of human trafficking among Afghan minors, the first time that Afghan cases had been reported to USCRI in the prior three years.

Of the reported cases, nearly 43 percent rose to the level of trafficking. Such cases include both sex and labor trafficking. These minors have access to intensive trauma-informed case management services, as well as other federal benefits that are accessible to refugee children.

Placement Breakdowns

Most UAMs were released into the custody of the adults they had traveled with, but these sponsor arrangements were not always successful. When this happens, it is referred to as a placement breakdown. Placement breakdowns happen for all UC populations, but Christie stated in 2022 that, "there is a sense that it is happening more often with UAMs compared to other populations."

Placement breakdowns among UAMs occurred for many reasons. Christie cited an example of one sponsor, a great aunt to three Afghan children, who became very sick, and the children had to help care for her. In other instances, USCRI staff said that sponsors misunderstood or were misinformed about the extent of their responsibilities toward the children. When those responsibilities became clear, adult sponsors no longer wanted to support them. Some sponsors, for example, did not understand their obligation to enroll children in school or secure their medical treatment.

Haygood said that sometimes it was "clear from the get-go that it wouldn't go well," but that the pressure to get children out of ORR custody superseded confirming the quality of the placement arrangement. This is a tension present in other UC populations—particularly amid rising concerns about labor exploitation of migrant children.[34]

Placement breakdowns put unaccompanied children, including UAMs, at risk of experiencing homelessness. Yet, regardless of the cause of placement breakdowns, solutions are often not straightforward. Generally, when a placement breakdown occurs, a case manager will assess the situation and, in instances of abuse and neglect, contact local child welfare agencies such as CPS. But the placement breakdowns among UAMs often do not constitute child abuse or neglect. USCRI staff said that CPS was often called but took no action. ORR, initially responsible for the placement, may also be reluctant to intervene. USCRI staff explained that "it's ORR policy to not take a UC back once they have been released to a sponsor." Even PRM has refrained from getting involved, viewing this type of issue as a welfare concern. The sense, according to frustrated USCRI staff, was that no one knew what to do, and no one wanted to take responsibility.

When USCRI and other resettlement agencies asked ORR and PRM for guidance on UAM welfare, staff said they received little to no communication. Eventually, a training session for resettlement agencies on working with UAMs from a welfare perspective was planned — but resettlement agencies were informed that they would need to provide it. USCRI led the training with two other resettlement agencies: the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). "No one wanted to step up and put out guidance," said one USCRI staff member. "It was a game of hot potato."

Case Study: USCRI Mental Health Consultant

The following case study shows the expertise, compassion, and cultural competence that the workers implementing mental health services possessed:

"An Afghan USCRI community health worker (CHW) texted me while she was in session with a young Afghan woman. The CHW was concerned about statements made by the young Afghan woman that may have been indicative of suicidal ideation.
The young Afghan woman fled Kabul during the evacuation with her new fiancé and his family, but all of her own family was left behind. While in session with the CHW, she stated that she would kill herself if she had to be resettled with and live in the same home with her fiancé's mother and sisters. She reported feeling emotionally controlled and abused by her fiancé's mother and sisters and was bothered by the amount of influence they have over her fiancé. She reported not being able to sleep and experiencing severe anxiety. She also alluded to fighting often with her fiancé's mother and sisters which often resulted in her feeling 'crazy.' After the CHW caught me up on the case, I went in and assessed her for suicidal risk and concluded that she was not at risk for suicide.

The young Afghan woman, the CHW, and I sat for over an hour and just talked about her life in Afghanistan, her family, her experiences during the evacuation and at Quantico, and her fears and worries resettling in the United States. As the minutes passed, the young Afghan woman noticeably relaxed and opened up more and more. Throughout the session, the CHW and I listened attentively and expressed interest in knowing who she was and what was important to her and expressed empathy and compassion for her struggles. We also discussed ways that she could more effectively manage interactions with her fiancé's sisters and mother. We promised to look into her case with the IOM and [the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the resettlement agency handling her case], and see if anything could be done to ensure that she was not placed in the same home as her fiancé's sisters and mother. At the end of the session, she was joking, smiling, and laughing with us. She said that when she initially came to talk to us, she felt like the world had gone dark, but now she felt like her world was lighter.

After talking to the IRC and IOM about her case, I met with her one more time. I explained that since she and her fiancé had separate HB numbers from her fiancé's sisters and mom, they would be processed separately and although they may be resettled in the same location, they would not be living in the same home. I also provided her with local resources that she could reach out to for help, including her local resettlement agency, a mosque, and a social services organization that provides domestic violence services. She again thanked us for our assistance and told us that since our last meeting, she had been sleeping better, felt more hopeful and better equipped to handle situations with her in-laws."

Preferred Communities Funding

Preferred Communities, the program that traditionally offers intensive case management to vulnerable refugee populations, has played a significant role in USCRI's service provision to Afghans and later Ukrainians.

The Preferred Communities (PC) Program is funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide intensive case management to the most vulnerable refugees. USCRI operates the PC program with more than 40 network partners and USCRI field offices across the country to help refugees move towards stability and self-sufficiency with individualized, comprehensive case management services. PC supports the most vulnerable ORR-eligible populations including victims of torture or gender-based violence, unaccompanied minors, and those with medical conditions, including disabilities and mental health concerns.

Congress approved supplemental funding to ORR in response to the crisis in Afghanistan. ORR awarded Preferred Communities grants and related supplemental funding to the national resettlement agencies, including USCRI. USCRI received approximately $9 million in Preferred Communities first supplemental funding (PC Supplemental I) to assist vulnerable Afghan populations. This was significantly larger than the PC budget that existed for all other populations. These funds could be used to hire case managers for intensive case management (ICM), the typical case management approach of PC services. It could also be used for direct financial assistance for Afghan clients.

The second round of Afghan supplemental funding in 2022, also known as PC Supplemental II, was even larger and was directed toward a wider range of services, such as legal services (discussed later in this report) and refugee health services. PC Supplemental II funding also paved the way for sites to cover more short-term case management that was less intensive compared to the ICM typically provided in PC— with this group of services falling under the umbrella term of "gap services."

Because Afghans were resettled in places outside of normal arrival patterns, PC supplemental funding also allowed for capacity building at both sites with Preferred Communities programming and sites without it. Funding was provided to 30 PC sites, as well as an additional seven sites where APA was administered outside of the normal PC case management program.

Housing

Resettlement agencies, non-profit organizations, and local community organizations all worked to provide housing for Afghan parolees. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) oversees a variety of programs and services. Despite these initiatives, resettlement agencies struggled to find affordable and appropriate long-term housing for Afghan arrivals in 2021 and 2022.

Around the country, property values and rent were high and on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic had a cooling effect on the rental housing market, but this had begun to rebound at the time of the evacuation, as prices surged because of high demand and competition among renters over dwindling supply. Data from the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) show that every state and major metropolitan area had a housing shortage for extremely low-income renters.[35]

Along with the nationwide shortage of affordable housing, arriving Afghan families did not have credit history in the United States. Under OAW, landlords and property managers were allowed, but not required, to forgo credit checks for Afghan parolees as long as they did not discriminate under the Fair Housing Act.[36]

Large familial units also affected housing options for Afghans. The average household size in Afghanistan is much larger than the American average. Occupancy standards and limitations may vary locally, but finding affordable housing for larger Afghan families turned out to be a challenge for resettlement.

Communities and local organizations were encouraged to welcome Afghans through donations or providing temporary housing options. An anonymous donor gave more than $1.6 million to USCRI from 2021 to the end of January 2022 to provide housing for Afghans. As a result, about 1,721 clients were served through 14 affiliates and field offices. In March 2022, USCRI received an additional grant of $400,000 from the same donor, also with the aim of providing housing.

In addition to this donor, the USCRI-administered Preferred Communities (PC) program received additional funding from ORR to support Afghans in securing housing. Through PC Supplemental I funding, sites could provide direct financial assistance for Afghans to cover rent. Later, with PC Supplemental II funding, some sites hired housing coordinators to work with local communities and landlords so Afghans could secure more long-term housing.

While these efforts have made an important difference to those in need, housing remains a challenge for Afghan parolees and other newcomer populations.

As the last Afghan departed the Safe Havens in February 2022, Phase I of OAW ended. For Phase II, the National Conference Center (NCC) in Leesburg, Virginia served as the intermediary site for Afghan evacuees between their stay at an overseas Lily Pad and their resettlement destination in the United States. The NCC is typically used as a corporate convention and training space and has the essence of a college campus. On September 27, 2022, DHS announced that all Afghans had departed the NCC to join communities across the United Sates.[37] Approximately 4,500 Afghans were processed at the NCC during this seven- month period.[38]

Though the NCC was logistically monitored and secured by the Department of Defense, it did not emit a military-style atmosphere. Afghans were free to independently depart if they chose, in which case the NCC transported them to the airport to travel to their desired destination— but not until they were first provided with comprehensive exit counseling.[V] While this process was a significant improvement from Phase I of OAW, USCRI staff noted that there were still challenges. "Communication breakdowns between the Lily Pads and service providers at the NCC and service providers and resettlement staff still occurred," said Campbell Dunsmore, a former USCRI policy analyst. "These breakdowns existed 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 was difficult to administer consistent care and protection to Afghans while moving from place to place and attempting to settle into stable lives."

Thousands of staff representing multiple NGOs worked in collaboration to provide services to Afghans such as comprehensive legal presentations outlining various status eligibilities and processing information, behavioral and mental health counseling, English language classes, cultural orientations, education for children and youth, and medical assistance. Every person who passed through the property was given a mental health screening, whereas only individuals flagged by legal service providers, case managers, or government staff were screened at Safe Havens during OAW Phase I.

Processing

The assurance process changed in Phase II, "where a flight would arrive one week, usually on a Wednesday or Thursday, and allocation meetings [between all resettlement agencies] would happen in the following week," Weyer said, noting it created an approximate two-and-a-half week cycle between arrival to the NCC and travel to the final destination. "It was more structured than in Phase I," said Weyer. For Phase II, resettlement agencies shared a combined capacity of "10,000 when only 5,000 Afghans were expected."

[V] In addition to pre-departure counseling, the Virtual Afghan Placement and Assistance program (VAPA) was established as a tool to connect independent departures to the resettlement services they were entitled to receive.

As a result, there were weeks where USCRI and other agencies did not receive Afghans, a remarkable slowdown when compared to the hectic experiences of resettlement agencies in Phase I.

Legal Services

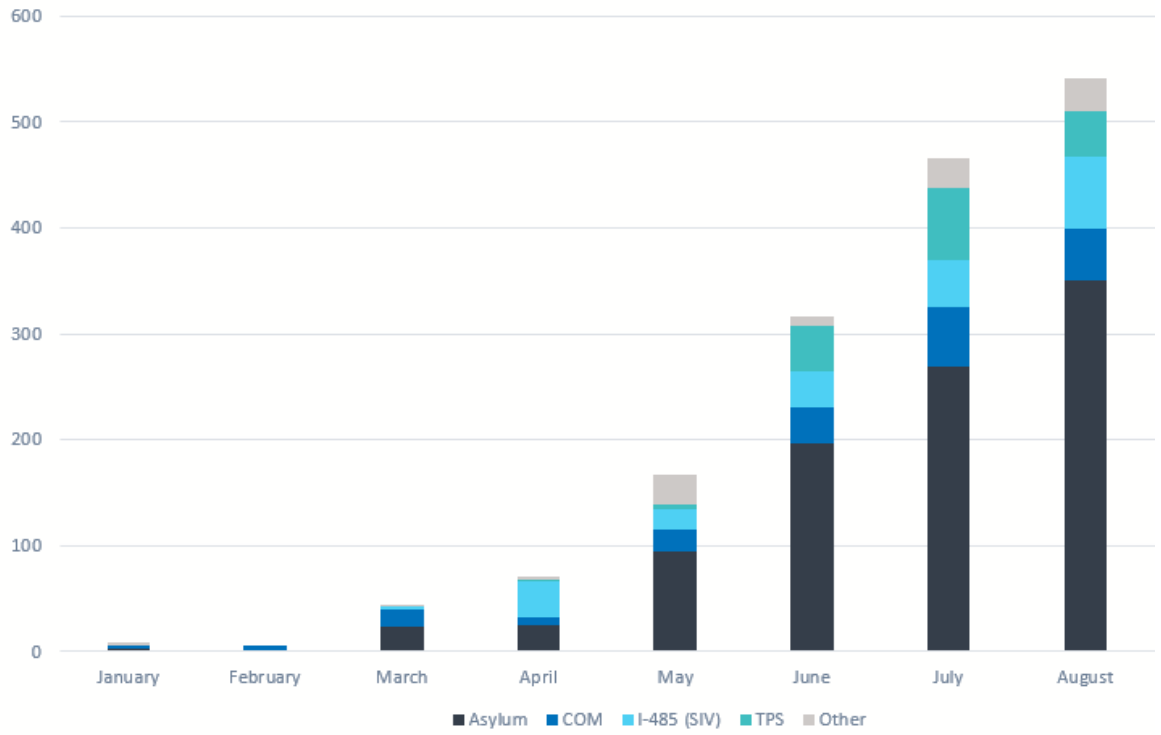
The legal side of helping Afghans out of Afghanistan started long before the evacuation—particularly through the SIV program and considerations for derivatives of applicants, such as a spouse or child.

After the NEO, legal service providers knew that many Afghans would request asylum but did not know the exact scale of the need. As a result, there was a large-scale, country-wide effort to provide immigration consultation clinics to conduct intakes and gather more information. Lowry, who is now USCRI's associate director of legal services, noted that this was a proactive effort with an eye toward a future system with more capacity to provide legal services to Afghans— "if, for a chance there was some sort of funding, we could hit the ground running." Between January and May 2022, USCRI conducted nine legal clinics serving a total of 350 people.

In April 2022, USCRI allocated $6 million to legal services from the second round of supplemental funding for PC (PC Supplemental II), which allowed sites to hire legal staff who could provide services for Afghans. PC Supplemental II funding was allocated across 19 affiliates and 13 USCRI legal offices, covering 21 states and 32 cities, based on a needs assessment. The first round of Afghan supplemental funding (PC Supplemental I) could be used by sites to cover immigration-related legal assistance. However, PC Supplemental II specifically funneled millions of dollars to legal service providers to expand legal assistance to Afghan clients. With the funding, immigration-related legal assistance to Afghans ramped up *[see Figure 4]*.

From March to the end of September 2022, which marked the end of OAW Phase II, USCRI had assisted 1,197 Afghans with their I-589 asylum petitions and about 712 combined filings for the SIV program, including COM approval, I-360s, and I-485s. These statistics only cover those services provided through PC funding.

Figure 4: USCRI legal data shows the ramp up in legal assistance to Afghans over the first eight months of 2022.



"Gap Services"

Later supplemental funding could also be used to cover so-called "gap services," a term coined by one of the resettlement agencies. In this context, gap services include services by the resettlement agencies that provide non-intensive case management for Afghan clients.

As previously discussed, the first round of supplemental funding for Preferred Communities allowed sites to hire case managers to provide intensive case management to OAW parolees. However, the second supplemental round of PC funding allowed sites to provide case management that was more short-term and could be family-based, instead of individual-based.

Funding for these gap services did allow sites to better address housing challenges that Afghan clients faced. With PC Supplemental II funding, housing coordinators were hired to build relationships with landlords, assess housing needs, and assist individuals find housing. There was also a continuation of the direct financial assistance that was funded through PC Supplemental I, which allowed Afghans to directly cover their rent for housing. This was a critical need amid reports of Afghans facing homelessness in early 2022.

Challenges Facing UAMs

Unaccompanied Afghan Minors (UAMs) remain eligible for ORR care even after turning 18 and are generally referred to PC intensive case management for close assistance. Weyer noted that there wasn't a system in place that allows resettlement agencies a chance to place these young adults in their network and arrange travel. Thus, for many UAMs, PC was the only resource— and a lack of prior knowledge about where and when UAMs would arrive made it difficult for the PC program to anticipate and respond to needs. Consequently, many of these young Afghans did not receive adequate assistance to help integrate into communities and begin their adult lives with more stability. In response to these issues, in Fiscal Year 2023, USCRI has worked to hire staff and case managers, particularly in PC, that specialize in working with minors and families. PC has also hosted several trainings specifically targeted at case managers who will be serving UAMs.

In the same vein, USCRI has begun to prioritize other activities to go beyond crisis intervention and promote integration and self-sufficiency. Some of these activities include facilitating women's groups, organizing financial literacy classes, and addressing mental health and psychological needs.

Continued Mental Health Services

Behavioral health support activities were available at seven Safe Havens starting in late 2021. Based on reports of suicidal ideation as well as disorders related to stress, resettlement, trauma, loss, and grief, USCRI prioritized mental health services as part of its PC Supplemental II programming.

Building on the work that was conducted at Safe Havens in Phase I, USCRI expanded the mental health resources provided to Afghans. USCRI compiled mental health resources in Dari and Pashto to give directly to clients. "We heard from sites that cases in immediate need of psychological or psychiatric counseling had wait times of two to three months if they were even able to find someone who spoke the language," said David Helfand, who served as USCRI's manager for refugee services. USCRI has a Dari-speaking mental health practitioner who can provide crisis intervention and immediate bridging services to those who are not able to see a community health care practitioner. For some of the most at-risk cases, USCRI has been able to connect them with a remote mental health practitioner for emergency counseling.

The United States resettled 88,500 Afghans in OAW Phases I and II, which ended in September 2022.[39] Since the conclusion of OAW, the federal government has continued to fund critical services for Afghan arrivals, including behavioral health programming and legal services. It coordinated and established Afghan Support Centers across the country to provide services to Afghans in centralized locations, mirroring efforts shortly after the evacuation. For the Biden administration, these continued efforts for Afghans collectively fall under the mantra "Enduring Welcome" to be distinct from OAR and OAW.[40]

But Afghans continue to face roadblocks to obtain lawful permanent status in the United States. Adjustment of status legislation has yet to be approved by Congress— either in the waning days of 2022 or in the ongoing 118th Congress. With these and other challenges, the two-year anniversary of the commencement of the NEO and OAW arrived in August 2023 with a mix of reflection and exhaustion.

Behavioral Health Program

In addition to PC Supplemental II funding, USCRI received a Medical Replacement Designee (MRD) grant from ORR to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate and trauma-informed behavioral health services to eligible Afghans across the United States. Funding for this grant was authorized under the ASA.

Under the grant, USCRI's Refugee Health Services developed a multi-tiered behavioral health support services program aimed at addressing the challenges associated with resettlement and integration.[41] In partnership with the Afghan Medical Professionals Association of America (AMPAA) and Rambo House, qualified professionals from the U.S. Afghan diaspora have led the service provision of this program, which builds on the groundwork laid in OAW Phase I and Phase II to expand access to mental health services to resettled Afghans across the country.

National Hotline

USCRI, in partnership with Rambo House, launched the Wellness Helpline for Afghans (WHA) on January 3, 2023. WHA is a 24/7 national crisis hotline that supports newly resettled Afghans. Services are provided in English, Dari, and Pashto by Afghan American staff *[see Figure 5].* Counseling is provided on an as-needed basis, and referrals to the appropriate services are provided immediately. Cases in need of emergency intervention will be flagged to a Crisis Response Team (CRT).

Telehealth Services

In partnership with AMPAA and Healis Health, USCRI launched the Heal Project on February 1, 2023. The Heal Project is a full-service telehealth platform, designed to enroll, assess, document, and serve Afghan clients through culturally appropriate services for both primary and psychosocial care. The project provides universal access across all 50 states in English, Dari, and Pashto by Afghan American staff.

Figure 5: Flyers for the Wellness Helpline for Afghans.

Behavioral Health Teams

USCRI has formed on-site BHTs in four states: Texas and Washington, which have the highest number of resettled Afghans, as well as in Florida and Pennsylvania, which have the greatest need according to the percent of underserved resettled Afghans. BHTs include Program Officers at the state level, case managers, and community mentors trained in behavioral health and wellness. Additionally, there is a national Program Officer who will assess state needs, support communication plans, and facilitate referrals.

BHTs are providing culturally appropriate services in English, Dari, and Pashto by working within the local medical structures of each state to help address and support the needs of the Afghan populations. Direct support, training, and technical assistance will be provided to local service providers.

Crisis Response Team

USCRI's Crisis Response Team is a multidisciplinary team equipped to provide immediate support to Afghans experiencing an acute behavioral health crisis. The CRT are coordinating with individual state health systems to deliver direct clinical services, psychosocial support, and wellness initiatives for Afghans in need of immediate care and treatment. The CRT includes clinicians, counselors, therapists, behavioral health care managers, and community mentors specialized in psychosocial, behavioral health, wellness, school, marriage, and family-based interventions. Additionally, the practitioners are trained in providing counseling to families, adolescents, and children. Services are available 24/7 across the country in English, Dari, and Pashto.

Legal Services

Immigration-related legal assistance has remained one of the top concerns of resettled Afghans— as it is crucial to pursuing temporary or permanent immigration relief, including retaining lawful work authorization.

But Afghan clients continue to face logistical hurdles as they navigate the legal system. For example, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) selects the locations where asylum interviews are to be administered. At times, USCIS conducts "circuit rides" to offer these interviews in different offices closer to where applicants live. But the system of circuit rides has been inconsistent nationally— with different field offices making different decisions on how and when to offer circuit rides. In one instance, Afghan parolees living in Erie, Pennsylvania, were required to travel more than 350 miles to the asylum office in Arlington, Virginia for interviews.

Medical examinations have been another area wracked by inconvenience and inconsistency. USCIS released guidance in February 2022 clarifying that certain OAW Afghan nationals applying for an adjustment of status do not have to repeat an immigration medical examination and submit a Form I-693 as part of their application.[42] However, USCRI legal service providers have heard from affiliates that some USCIS offices or officers are refusing to follow this guidance and have required new medical exams, which can cost hundreds of dollars.

Given long delays in obtaining asylum or SIV-based protections, USCRI's legal network has engaged in multiple strategies to pursue temporary immigration relief for their clients. In late 2022 and early 2023, for example, numerous organizations pursued Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for their Afghan clients— even though the designation of Afghanistan for TPS was only set to last through November 20, 2023. However, over the summer of 2023, much of this work shifted to affirmative applications for renewing parole and work authorization under a new re-parole process established by the Biden administration. Among service providers, TPS is also viewed less favorably when Afghans with only TPS and no other ORR-eligible immigration status are not eligible for benefits or services that unexpired parole may provide.[43]

Immigration Legal Services for Afghan Arrivals

In December 2022, USCRI received a $75.5 million award from ORR to provide pro bono legal services to Afghan parolees throughout the United States. Funded through September 2024, the project is called Immigration Legal Services for Afghan Arrivals (ILSAA).

ILSAA directly helps Eligible Afghan Arrivals (EAAs) navigate the U.S. legal immigration system by providing access to free immigration legal services, including help with applying for asylum, adjustment of status, Temporary Protected Status, work authorization, and other petitions.[44] ILSAA is also meant to boost existing legal capacity throughout the United States to serve EAAs through trainings, resources, peer networking opportunities, and other ongoing support.

In the early months of 2023, ILSAA worked to hire attorneys across the country, as well as reach out to legal service providers to gauge what gaps existed for Afghan clients obtaining low- or pro bono legal services. Re-parole for Afghans has been a major priority for ILSAA in the final three to four months of Fiscal Year 2023. On June 8, 2023, a new streamlined process for Afghans to renew their parole and work authorization for an additional two years was started.[45] Afghans who had already filed for asylum or an adjustment of status would be automatically considered for a parole extension. ILSAA has provided a series of webinars to educate legal service providers on the re-parole process. ILSAA attorneys also attended Afghan Support Centers in Phoenix, Tucson, Sacramento, Pittsburgh, and Seattle to provide legal consultations, including helping Afghan clients file for re-parole.

Ongoing Challenges

The Afghan Adjustment Act

Humanitarian parole saved lives by enabling the rapid entry and admission of Afghan evacuees into the United States during the evacuation. However, parole does not offer the same protections that Afghans would have received if they had entered as refugees or through Special Immigrant Visas. Shortly after the evacuation, advocates suspected that adjustment of status legislation would become necessary to resolve the legal status of tens of thousands of humanitarian parolees admitted around the same time.

The Afghan Adjustment Act was introduced in both chambers of the 117th Congress in August 2022.[46] The AAA would establish a streamlined, fee-exempt adjustment of status process for eligible Afghan parolees to apply for lawful permanent residency. The AAA also contains non-adjustment provisions important to resettlement and relocation:

- Establishing an office in lieu of an embassy to process consular requests and applications from eligible Afghans;
- Creating an inter-agency task force on Afghan ally resettlement;

- Adjusting SIV eligibility to offer the program to those who were not directly employed by the U.S. military, such as those who worked for the Afghan Air Force or the Female Tactical Units; and
- Requiring the Department of State to respond to Congressional inquiries on individual cases.

The AAA received widespread support from a constellation of Afghan Americans, faith-based organizations, resettlement agencies, veterans' groups, refugee and immigrant rights' advocates, businesses, service providers, and many others. Through that support, the AAA gained more than 120 additional co-sponsors in the House of Representatives.[47] It also gained additional bipartisan support from powerful members of the Senate, including Jerry Moran of Kansas and Roger Wicker of Mississippi— who are the ranking members on the Senate Veterans and Armed Services Committees, respectively.

AAA nearly became law in December 2022 during the omnibus, Congress' end of the year spending package. However, the AAA was ultimately not included in the larger spending bill before Congress adjourned for the holidays. "Both parties let down tens of thousands of Afghans who served our country honorably," USCRI said in a statement. "This is an epic and unacceptable abdication of the United States' responsibilities to our Afghan allies."[48]

The Afghan Adjustment Act was reintroduced in July 2023 by a bipartisan group of lawmakers in both chambers of Congress.[49] The reintroduced AAA largely mirrors the contents of the bill that was circulated for discussion and co-sponsorship in December. The bill had more than twice the number of original Senate sponsors and co-sponsors it had in August 2022— including ten U.S. senators evenly split between the parties, a tenth of the upper chamber's membership.

The AAA's fate remains uncertain in a Congress under divided partisan control— with a Republican-majority House of Representatives and a Democratic-majority Senate. However, advocates believe AAA's merits transcend partisan interests in the ongoing national debate around immigration policy. "One thing I stress in meetings is that the AAA is not just an immigration bill," said USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar. "It is about the United States standing by its security and civil society partners from the country's longest war— which reflects on how current and future allies view the value of an American promise. This bill is also about the veterans and community service organizations who have stepped up in the last two years in the vacuum to serve Afghan newcomers."

"A lot of Congressional offices were touched by the evacuation— trying to help their constituents get their people out of Afghanistan," Salazar added. "Afghans' stories resonate with members of Congress and their staff— and we continue to press how essential this legislation is extending solidarity and permanency to Afghan newcomers and those that welcomed them."

Pathways for Afghans

Permanent and temporary pathways for Afghans in Afghanistan and third countries remain fraught with challenges. On August 2, 2021, the Biden administration announced a Priority 2 designation for certain Afghan nationals to receive refugee status.[50] However, two years later, advocates largely agree that P-2 has been an extremely ineffectual pathway for Afghans to safety. The U.S. government cites the lack of a Resettlement Support Center (RSC) in Pakistan as the source of the nonexistent progress on P-2 cases out of Pakistan.[51]

During Phase II of OAW, U.S. government agencies worked to streamline refugee processing at CAS, and most had been approved to depart in 30 to 60 days. Approximately 2,453 Afghans entered the United States under the refugee program in 2022. Increased processing across the USRAP has resulted in more Afghan refugee arrivals—with 4,109 admissions in 2023 through the end of July.

The SIV program has also faced years-long problems at nearly every stage of the process:

- The Afghan SIV process begins with the applicant submitting an email to a dedicated address at the National Visa Center (NVC) requesting consideration for an SIV. However, the email backlog at the NVC surged dramatically in August 2021 and remained above 300,000 emails through June 2022 due to a mixture of new applications, applicants providing additional information, and general inquiries.[52]
- Documentary requirements of the program can be difficult if not impossible to meet. The requirement for a letter of recommendation or evaluation from a direct U.S. citizen supervisor can be onerous when supervisors would rapidly rotate out of Afghanistan or are since unreachable.[53]
- Through June 2022, a Form I-360 was required in between the Chief of Mission (COM) approval phase and the visa application process, adding an unnecessary bureaucratic hurdle to complete.

More than 150,000 SIV applicants reportedly remain in Afghanistan— many of them under direct threat by the Taliban due to their work with American or coalition forces and the former government. Indeed, reprisal beatings and killings against former civilian contractors or Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) members are common in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.[54]

Afghans overseas have also applied for humanitarian parole, but this temporary pathway has been largely closed. About 44,785 humanitarian parole applications from Afghan nationals were submitted from January 1, 2020, to April 6, 2022— but only 114 were approved.[55] International Refugee Assistance Project and the American Immigration Council note “this bottleneck of applications essentially foreclosed this benefit as a potential option for those Afghans who could not reach the United States, many of whom remained in Afghanistan.”[56]

Southern Border Arrivals

With lawful pathways to safety mired in problems, Afghans have gone to extreme lengths to reach the United States. Thousands of Afghans were apprehended at the United States-Mexico border in the final months of 2022.[57] Many of these arrivals have gone through Brazil, where the government offers temporary humanitarian visas and residence permits for Afghan nationals. After leaving Brazil, Afghans have crossed through the Darién Gap along with other displaced populations on their way northward, facing hostile conditions in the lawless, undeveloped jungle region of eastern Panama that borders Colombia.

Afghans arriving at the southern border have been received with little to no consistency.[58] Arriving Afghans are frequently granted different types of parole— some receive humanitarian parole while others receive conditional parole out of custody. Parole periods can vary widely— from a few days to nearly a year. Some Afghans arriving via the southern border are provided Notices to Appear (NTAs) in immigration court, whereas others are not.

While this arriving Afghan population often relocates to join family or friends in other parts of the country, it remains a particularly vulnerable population that may not be able to access resettlement benefits or legal services funded by ORR.

Administrative Engagement and Advocacy

USCRI and other organizations continue their legislative advocacy on the Afghan Adjustment Act to provide a pathway to permanent status. However, with AAA yet to be acted upon in Congress, administrative advocacy also plays an important role in strengthening protections and services for Afghans.

In meetings with federal officials at agencies such as USCIS or ORR, USCRI program and policy staff advocate for changes or clarifications that will better allow USCRI and its network to serve Afghan clients.

In the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023, USCRI joined other organizations to call for streamlined processes for Afghan parolees to request re-parole. In that advocacy, organizations also called for the government to take steps to ensure the continuity of critical ORR services and benefits for Afghan parolees when their parole periods began expiring in the summer of 2023. In 2023, the administration ultimately opened a re-parole process on June 8 and, on August 1, announced a policy to ensure continuity of ORR eligibility for Afghan parolees who had filed for re-parole, asylum, or adjustment of status before the end of their initial parole.[59]

USCRI also co-led the advocacy campaign for the redesignation of Afghanistan for Temporary Protected Status (TPS). More than 160 organizations joined the request drafted by USCRI with LIRS and the Afghan American Foundation.[60]

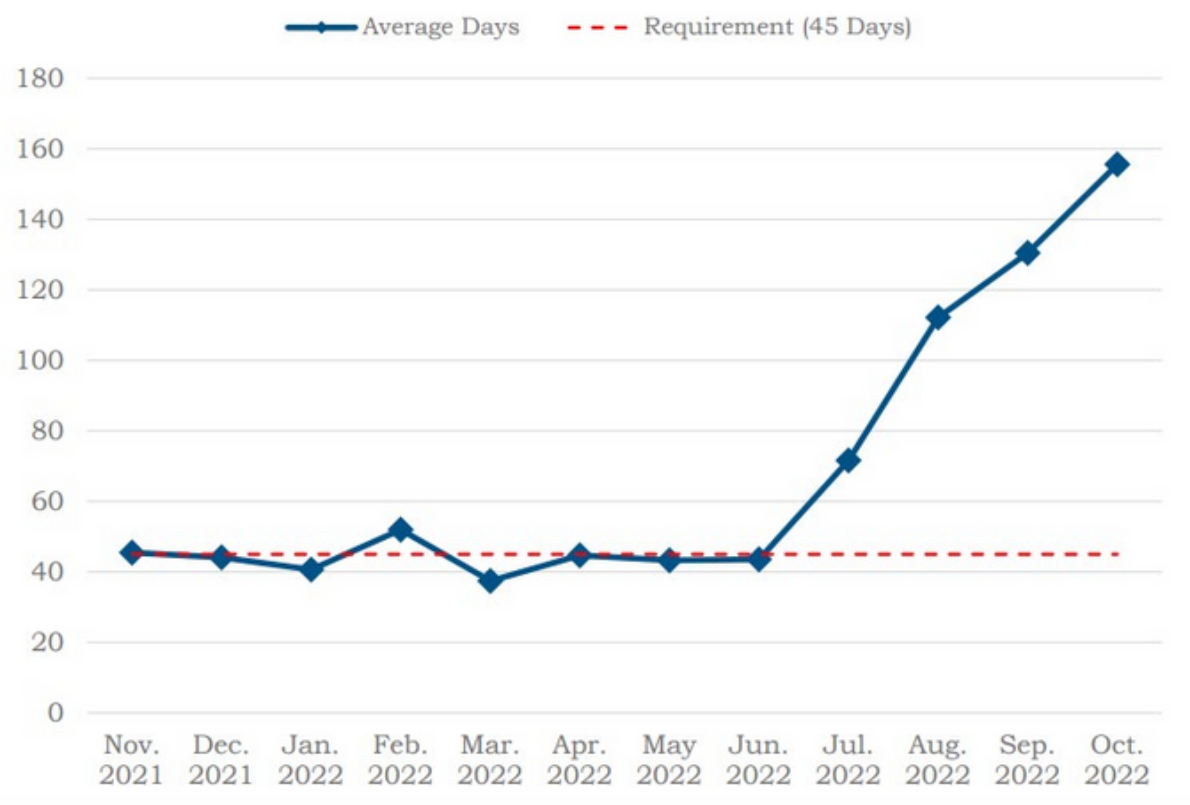
In coordination with its partners in the Evacuate Our Allies and Refugee Council USA coalitions, USCRI will continue to participate in administrative advocacy on enhancing protections for Afghans. ”Advocacy cannot be done alone,” Negash said.

While much of the Afghan resettlement response was a unique experience for the resettlement agencies, the intervening two years provide insights on current and future responses to effectively serve newcomer populations.

Temporary, piecemeal policy responses have consequences— A more efficient SIV process and a refugee admissions program with stronger capacity in 2021 would have ensured a more effective response from the U.S. government to the crisis in Afghanistan. Instead, the use of parole created challenges administering benefits that remain acute to this day, as Afghans nervously wait on re-parole adjudications and notices of parole extensions.

Furthermore, the need for an Afghan Adjustment Act in 2023 could have been avoided nearly two years ago. In 2021, the White House suggested that Congress allow Afghan parolees with one year of U.S. residence to apply for adjustment to permanent status.[61] Instead, Congress called on USCIS to expedite asylum processing for OAW Afghans. "Adding tens of thousands of Afghan evacuees into existing backlogs will further overload already strained adjudication systems," the Migration Policy Institute warned in March 2022.[62]

Figure 6: Average days from asylum application receipt to interview for a total of 2,425 OAW Afghan asylum applicants through May 31, 2022[63]



Source: DHS OIG analysis of USCIS data

As a result, asylum processing times *[see Figure 6]* predictably shot up. Without a permanent status secure, Afghans increasingly filed for TPS, re-parole, or both— further adding to USCIS backlogs. Band-Aid solutions have repeatedly created their own set of problems. In this way, these consequences demonstrate the need for systemic reforms that prioritize permanency, such as a modernized USRAP and the streamlined path to permanency contained in the AAA.

Robust support and innovative approaches should be part of the norm, not the exception— Through supplemental funding, the U.S. government made significant investments in providing services and benefits to arriving Afghans. After OAW ended, the federal government continued this support in the form of programs such as ILSAA, as well as holistic outreach to the OAW population through the Afghan Support Centers.

The OAW response has been frequently compared to the administration's response to displacement from Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February 2022.[64] But in both cases, significant federal support backed up by creative albeit imperfect programs, such as Uniting for Ukraine or the Afghan re-parole process, demonstrate how the U.S. government can respond to acute displacement crises in dynamic ways that get newcomers connected to the support and services they need in the United States.

Timely guidance matters— When resettlement agencies were closely working with federal partners to administer rapidly established programs, timely guidance was essential for smooth operations. Indeed, in the case of APA, the lack of timely and consistent guidance caused compliance challenges for the resettlement agencies.[65] Eleventh-hour guidance from USCIS and ORR on re-parole or benefits eligibility for Afghan parolees, respectively, created enormous stress for Afghans in the summer of 2023. Timely and relevant guidance from federal partners is in the best interest of Afghans themselves, legal and resettlement service providers, and local, state, and federal stakeholders.

Vulnerable groups must not be forgotten— For the enormous investments in services and benefits to the OAW population, some groups have fallen through the cracks. As discussed in this report, stakeholders frequently dodged responsibility on negative outcomes for UAMs, including placement breakdowns and reports of exploitation and human trafficking. Afghans arriving via the southern border are also excluded from many of the services funded by the federal government due to the type of parole they received or their defensive asylum posture. It is important that the resettlement system's various programs, from behavioral health support to legal services, are conscientious of aiding the most vulnerable, hardest-to-reach members of the target population. The trauma from August 2021 makes this task all the more essential with Afghans.

Coalitions remain essential— While this report focuses primarily on the Afghan resettlement response from USCRI's perspective, this work did not occur in a silo. Resettlement staff and community partners from across the country collaborated and shared best practices and insights with one another and continue to do so to this day. The last two years have demonstrated the value of coalitions and cooperation in demanding the U.S. government meet the displacement and integration challenges described in this report head on.

Recommendations

USCRI recommends the following to assure the United States' commitments to its Afghan allies, within the United States and abroad, and to continue to help vulnerable Afghans:

1. **Passage of the Afghan Adjustment Act (AAA)** to create a streamlined adjustment of status process for Afghan parolees, launch an inter-agency task force on Afghan ally resettlement, boost Congressional oversight of Afghan ally resettlement, and create an office in lieu of an embassy to support consular processing of requests for protection, among other measures; followed by an efficient and transparent implementation process by DHS, State, and other relevant agencies.

2. **Redesignation and extension of Afghanistan for Temporary Protected Status (TPS)** on account of current country conditions, followed by a corresponding Federal Register notice (FRN) including a date for continuous residence and physical presence that maximizes protections to newly arrived Afghans, as well as language on the automatic extension of Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) issued under the initial designation period of TPS for Afghanistan.[vi]

3. **Reforms to increase U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) processing for Afghans in third countries**, including a review of options to jumpstart progress in Priority 1 and Priority 2 cases in Pakistan.

4. **Expanded and consistent use of circuit rides** by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to reduce geographic and other barriers for Afghans to attend asylum interviews.

5. Training and further guidance to ensure **adherence to stated USCIS policy on medical examination requirements for Afghan clients**.

6. **Passage of the Afghan Allies Protection Act (AAPA) to reform and bolster the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program** for Afghan allies, including through virtual interviews for applicants unable to travel outside of Afghanistan.

7. **More consistent grants of parole to Afghan nationals at the southern border,** on a case-by-case basis, under Section 212(d)(5) of the Immigration and Nationality Act to ensure these individuals are eligible for services and have sufficient time to find adequate legal representation.

[vi] As of this report's publication date, the Department of Homeland Security had not announced its decision on Temporary Protected Status for Afghanistan after the initial period closes on November 20, 2023. By statute, it must reach that decision at least 60 days prior to the November 20, 2023, end of the initial designation period.

Conclusion

Two years after the Taliban takeover, the needs remain massive.

More than 1.6 million Afghans have fled the country since 2021— resulting in about 8.2 million Afghans in neighboring countries as Afghanistan faces one of the planet's gravest humanitarian crises.[66] This is a tragic continuation and deepening of the instability that has affected Afghanistan for decades, with cycles of fragility, conflict, and violence stretching back to the Soviet invasion.

Economic malaise and natural disasters have exacerbated displacement in Afghanistan. After the Taliban seized power, the rapid cessation of aid, loss of access to international banks, disruptions in services, and loss of human capital from the mass exodus drove the country's economic collapse. Food insecurity remains widespread across Afghanistan amid severe drought and high fuel and food prices from the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

Over the last two years, the interim Taliban authorities have waged an unapologetic campaign to target former employees of the previous government and its military forces.[67] They have also pursued policies aimed at the systemic erasure of women and girls from public life in Afghanistan.[68] Amid these challenging conditions, humanitarian actors continue to provide life-saving assistance across the country under extreme circumstances.

However, under Taliban rule, there is no future back in Afghanistan for Afghans who were evacuated to the United States or fled to neighboring countries.

The country-wide effort to welcome Afghans in 2021 and 2022 was a testament to the United States' capacity to offer refuge and safety to those who need it the most. The U.S. government and its partners continue to make large investments in providing aid and assistance to Afghan arrivals. Much of this work occurs far from the spotlight and the attention during the frenzied days of the non-combatant evacuation operation and the first phase of Operation Allies Welcome.

But the promise of lasting safety and security remains incomplete. As a field committed to protection and human rights, we must strive to ensure the most vulnerable Afghans receive the support necessary to establish themselves in the United States. We must continue to advocate for changes in law and policy that ensure that Afghans can achieve permanency here in the United States. We also must not forget those caught in limbo in other countries— and we urge robust protection pathways to ensure those individuals or families reach safety.

The work of this unique moment in U.S. refugee resettlement and integration continues.

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The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), established in 1911, is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit organization dedicated to addressing the needs and rights of refugees and immigrants.

This report is part of USCRI's ongoing commitment to serving the needs of Afghan arrivals. USCRI operates the Post-Resettlement Behavioral Health Support Services Program to support resettled Afghans dealing with trauma and the transition to life in the U.S. through culturally and linguistically tailored, trauma-informed behavioral health services. USCRI also offers Immigration Legal Services for Afghan Arrivals (ILSAA), providing Eligible Afghan Arrivals across the country with free legal services so they can navigate the U.S. immigration system.

USCRI advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants both nationally and globally, helping to drive policies, practices, and law.

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