



Refugee groups race to find housing for 53,000 Afghan evacuees

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Refugee resettlement agencies are racing to find housing for the approximately 53,000 Afghans on military bases in the United States who will eventually be resettled in the country, but the groups are facing a strained -- and expensive -- housing market.

Every year, refugee agencies find houses or apartments for refugees to live once they're admitted to the United States. It's a cumbersome process that often happens months before a refugee arrives. But the frenzied evacuation of Afghans from Afghanistan has turned the process on its head, with agencies trying to find housing for refugees who are already in the US with limited funds.

"We're expected as a resettlement agency to do the work over the next three to four months that we did over four years," said Jenny Yang, senior vice president of advocacy and policy at World Relief.

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that refugee agencies were already under strain after years of low admissions under the Trump administration, requiring them to close offices and lay off staff. That meant they also lost some existing relationships with landlords.

The federal government provides a one-time payment of \$2,275 for each Afghan an agency serves, of which \$1,225 is available for agencies to use for direct assistance like housing and basic necessities, including furniture and silverware. The other bulk of the money is used to cover administrative costs.

While outside help and donations might add to those funds, rent remains expensive. The national median rent rose to \$1,302 in September, up 15% from a year ago, according to a report from Apartment List, a rental listing site.

"The housing crisis is essentially what Americans are experiencing but imagine approaching it when you don't have a nest egg, you don't have a safe income yet, you have no landlord references or history," said Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, a refugee resettlement agency.

So far, few Afghan evacuees have left the eight military installations that are being used to house Afghans while they finish processing, ranging from a couple dozen to a hundred a day, according to an administration official.

"It's obviously going to need to be thousands of people moving off a week," a senior administration official told CNN. "We're also cognizant of the fact that if we move people off too quickly before we have adequate housing and the other wrap-around services that people need set up that they could end up in a situation where they don't succeed from the start in their new homes, so we're trying to get the balance right."

More are expected to be ready to relocate to their homes in the coming days, as they wrap processing and meet medical checks. "We're all nervous about having them come off too quickly but we understand that they need to come off as quickly as possible," said Mark Hetfield, president and CEO of HIAS, one of nine resettlement agencies that works with the US government.

The challenge: finding rental properties and getting new landlords on board.

Depending on the city, there are simply not enough rental properties and some landlords might be hesitant to rent to people without a credit history, for example, refugee advocates say. Airbnb announced in August that

Airbnb.org, an independent non-profit organization, would provide temporary housing to 20,000 Afghan refugees worldwide. And while advocates say that's helpful, they want to find a long-term home for refugees.

Finding housing for refugees is always a challenge, Hetfield said, but the recent housing market has made it more so.

"Doing it during a pandemic, during a housing boom, during a housing shortage for large families who tend to be concentrated in cities that are not inexpensive to live in -- that's a challenging constellation," Hetfield said.

The White House told state governors in mid-September how many Afghan refugees they can expect to be resettled in their states in coming weeks.

The allocations to each state were made under the new Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) Program and were based on the initial 37,000 arrivals. Under the plan, California and Texas will have the highest capacities -- 5,255 and 4,481, respectively. Washington, Oklahoma, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, New York and Virginia are also slated to resettle more than 1,000 Afghan refugees. Mississippi and Alabama are projected to resettle the lowest number of Afghans: 10 each.

A one-size fits all program

The nine refugee resettlement agencies that work with the federal government will ultimately determine where Afghans are relocated, based on whether they have US ties or where their local affiliates have capacity to take them in. The agencies receive federal funds to provide housing assistance to refugees.

"When people first arrived, we weren't sure where they wanted to go or where in the US might be the best fit for them," the senior administration official told CNN. "We learned that a lot of people have ties to specific parts of the country."

The Biden administration is in regular touch with the private sector and state and local government to try to scale up the effort, including targeted campaigns, and to identify potential homes, the official said.

Refugees and special immigrant visa holders -- a visa for Afghans who were employed by or worked on behalf of the US government -- have access to a range of short and long-term services to get up on their feet, from help with housing and employment to cash and medical assistance. But parole, while providing some reprieve, doesn't unlock services that refugees receive and many of those who fled Afghanistan have been paroled into the US.

To try to solve for that, the State Department set up the so-called Afghan Placement and Assistance Program, extending some of the assistance provided to refugees to parolees. It's a one-size-fits-all program across cities despite ranging housing costs.

Resettlement agencies are considering how they might incentivize refugees to live in a city in the US that might not be their first choice, either because family lives elsewhere in the US or there are established Afghan communities they may want to join, by covering rent longer, matching them with a job or simply educating Afghans on different costs of living.

Kristyn Peck, CEO of Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area, said her team is relying on housing leads from the community.

"People saying, 'I have an apartment I'm willing to rent out,'" Peck told CNN. "That's where a lot the housing leads come in. Typically, we're working with preferred landlords. Right now, we're reliant on leads in the community because of the scarcity." The local Afghan community is helping with that effort by helping organize leads and following them up to discern what's viable.

When there isn't an immediate rental property available, some have had to go to hotels. In Sacramento, a city where rents are high, a family of seven had to be split up into two rooms at a hotel until a property comes available, according to Yang. They've been there for three weeks.

Resettlement staff has been working with Afghan refugees since began arriving at US bases at the end of August. While these bases were supposed to provide temporary housing for Afghans as they finalized processing, the bases have become semi-permanent homes for refugees that have now been living there for almost six weeks.

"I think the leadership and the soldiers there are doing their best to try to provide as much hospitality as possible," said Democratic Rep. Veronica Escobar, who visited the Fort Bliss base.

But living in tents for months is not a sustainable solution, she added.

"There's going to come a time when families just you know need to be in a normal community, not on a military installation where they can go to a grocery store, where they can interact with the greater community and enjoy amenities in a greater community and go to work," Escobar said.

Push for additional resources

The Biden administration requested \$6.4 billion in additional funds this month to bolster capacity and extend assistance to Afghan evacuees who partnered with the US during the war in Afghanistan. Additional funds are included in the continuing resolution that Congress passed Thursday to avert a government shutdown.

In addition to funding the government until December 3, the stopgap bill will "provide funding to help process and resettle Afghan refugees and finally deliver on critical disaster aid for Americans battered by storms and wildfires this summer," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer Thursday morning.

Advocates have repeatedly underscored the urgency behind getting the continuing resolution passed to provide additional benefits to Afghan parolees.

"We also know without significant resources, there's the real prospect of homelessness for some of these families," O'Mara Vignarajah said.

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