

LOCAL

'A story worth telling': Refugee Welcome Network helps Afghans settle in Hagerstown area

**Katharine Wilson**

The Herald-Mail

Published 5:06 a.m. ET July 27, 2023

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August of 2021, six families fled and ended up in Washington County.

Now, a coalition of faith leaders and volunteers have teamed up to help these refugees adjust to life in the United States.

More than 20 volunteers banded together to form the Refugee Welcome Network in January to help the refugees back on their feet.

The refugees had to leave

The refugees were all tied to the old government of Afghanistan and the United States government through their careers or personal lives, making them a target.

The families had no choice but to start their lives from scratch in the United States, said Basheer Azizi, president of the Islamic Center of Hagerstown. Their lives were at risk, and some were being tracked by the Taliban, he said.

"They put their lives at risk in support of democracy and wanting to create a better life for themselves," Azizi said.

Once the United States withdrew from Afghan, the families took different paths to reach Washington County.

Most of the refugees already had Special Immigrant Visas which granted them permanent residency in the United States. These visas were available to Afghans who were employed by or worked on behalf of the United States government, according to U.S. State Department.

Two families had applications that were in progress or lost when they decided to flee. They flew to Brazil then traveled by foot, bus and other methods to the U.S.-Mexico border. Once the refugees reached the border, they received alien

numbers from border officials.

Once they got this number, also called an "A-Number," the clock started ticking to apply for asylum within one year.

The group formed in Hagerstown

Azizi said many of the refugees contacted the Islamic Center of Hagerstown to meet people and find a support system.

The Islamic center already had in place resources for immigrants in the Muslim-American community, including a food pantry, career training and English classes.

In November the refugees also reached out to the Hagerstown Area Religious Council, churches and local nonprofits for assistance.

Kathy Powderly is the executive director of the Hagerstown Area Religious Council, a coalition of houses of worship in Washington County. Powderly said helping the refugees aligned with the goals of the religious council, leading her to act.

"We believe that all people are created equal and loved by God," Powderly said.

She reached out to Azizi asking if they could start a group to streamline services for the refugees; Azizi was already thinking the same thing.

"We decided, let's come together and let's help them in a systematic way," Azizi said.

The group of more than 20 is made up of people representing different houses of worship and outside volunteers all with one goal — to help the refugees.

What are the volunteers doing?

The Refugee Welcome Network helps the families with everything from car rides to legal documents.

"All of the families desperately do not want to be on assistance, but to be self-sufficient and providing for their own families," Powderly said.

Azizi handles the intake process for refugees through the Islamic center. He acts as a "cultural bridge" between the refugees and other volunteers. Because of the group's differing backgrounds and faiths, there are sometimes communication barriers that Azizi works to resolve.

Once in the group, the refugees are assigned to one or two volunteers, called "a friend of the family." The volunteers
<https://www.heraldmailmedia.com/story/news/local/2023/07/27/...> 4/9

get close with the family and help them with day-to-day assistance while they get acclimated to their new life, Azizi said.

Housing is a huge hurdle for the refugees, who initially don't have jobs to pay rent or a mortgage.

Refugees cannot receive work authorization until at least 180 days after they file their asylum application, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

The network connected the families to landlords in the area willing to take on the refugees until they can support themselves. They have also used rental assistance funds and direct donations to supply around three months of rent to the families.

Monetary donations from local churches, nonprofits and individuals have been used to purchase groceries and household appliances for families.

Transportation volunteers help the refugees travel to medical appointments, grocery stores and community events until they are able to purchase a vehicle.

The Literacy Council of Washington County is providing English classes for the refugees who don't speak the language or don't speak it fluently. The network is also organizing vocational classes so the refugees can find a job.

Some of the refugees were doctors, government employees and a mayor in their home country, according to Powderly. Now they have to grapple with starting a new career in the U.S.

Azizi said they have had some success stories. In around four months of working with the welcome network, the refugees have already had "graduate families" who have a full-time job and car.

"Sometimes I wonder where that family would be if the Refugee Welcome Network did not exist," Azizi said.

'A story worth telling'

For the two families who didn't come to the country with a Special Immigrant Visa, a smaller team of volunteers is helping the with asylum paperwork.

Paulette Lee is one of the "dream team" members working through the asylum process, which she says is no easy task.

"It's laborious because we have to prove that if they were to return to Afghanistan, their lives would be in danger," Lee said.

She said the refugees they're working with have very strong stories, but the paperwork requires exact dates,

proof, pictures and more. With a language barrier, having a perfectly detailed report is very difficult.

The team spent hours interviewing the refugees. After the interview, Lee would write up the first draft of the statement, someone else would edit the statement and then their lawyer reviews the final version.

Azizi said the passion of the volunteers has been inspiring. They have gone out of their way to help the families during holidays, after hours and sometimes spending money out of their own pocket.

"These families thought they would be abandoned here, but the community has come together to take care of them, and that is a story worth telling" Azizi said.

Why did the volunteers step up?

The Refugee Welcome Network volunteers all had different reasons to step up for these families. Powderly said her reasoning came from her Christian faith.

"My faith tells me that we need to welcome the stranger," Powderly said.

The religious council director also reasoned that the parents among the refugees are doing what they have to do to protect their families, and what wouldn't a parent do for their children?

"Anyone who's seeking refuge in another country, it's not because they want to leave their country," Powderly said. "They're here because they are in fear for their lives or the lives of their children."

She said people should listen to the stories of refugees and immigrants; they matter.

Azizi said the negative assumptions people have about refugees and immigrants comes from a lack of information, misunderstandings or misconceptions. He emphasized that the people they are helping are in this place because of their choice to be U.S. allies.

"What we're focused on here is a group of people that were allied and who put their lives at risk to support our mission in Afghanistan," Azizi said. "Now they're here in their hour of need."

Looking forward

Currently the network is only helping refugees from Afghanistan, but some volunteers said they would be interested in helping more refugees after they get their current families settled.

People interested in helping the refugees can donate through the Hagerstown Area Religious Council website, harccoalition.org, and contact Powderly for more

"It's a wonderful example of how the faith community and the community in general can come together for a common cause," Powderly said.

How to help If you would like to support the Refugee Welcome Network, visit the Hagerstown Area Religious Council website at harccoalition.org or call 301-842-HARC.