

Americans Stretch Across Political Divides to Welcome Afghan Refugees

“Even the most right-leaning isolationists” are coming forward to help those fleeing Afghanistan, a pastor said. A mass mobilization is underway.



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PHOENIX — The hundreds of parishioners at Desert Springs Bible Church, a sprawling megachurch in the northern suburbs of Phoenix, are divided over mask mandates, the presidential election and what to do about migrants on the border. But they are unified on one issue: the need for the United States to take in thousands of Afghan evacuees, and they are passing the plate to make it happen.

“Even the most right-leaning isolationists within our sphere recognize the level of responsibility that America has to people who sacrificed for the nation’s interest,” said Caleb Campbell, the evangelical church’s lead pastor.

Last weekend, the church inaugurated a campaign to raise money for the dozens of Afghan families who are expected to start streaming into greater Phoenix in the next several weeks. Already, thousands of dollars have flowed into the church’s “benevolence fund.”

“This is a galvanizing moment,” said Mr. Campbell, 39.

Throughout the United States, Americans across the political spectrum are stepping forward to welcome Afghans who aided the U.S. war effort in one of the largest mass mobilizations of volunteers since the end of the Vietnam War.

In rural Minnesota, an agricultural specialist has been working on visa applications and providing temporary housing for the newcomers, and she has set up an area for halal meat processing on her farm. In California, a group of veterans has sent a welcoming committee to the Sacramento airport to greet every arriving family. In Arkansas, volunteers are signing up to buy groceries, do airport pickups and host families in their homes.

“Thousands of people just fled their homeland with maybe one set of spare clothes,” said Jessica Ginger, 39, of Bentonville, Ark. “They need housing and support, and I can offer both.”



"Even the most right-leaning isolationists within our sphere recognize the level of responsibility that America has to people who sacrificed for the nation's interest," Caleb Campbell, an evangelical pastor, said. Ash Ponders for The New York Times



Goods collected for Afghan evacuees inside Mission Community Church in Gilbert, Ariz. Ash Ponders for The New York Times

Donations are pouring into nonprofits that assist refugees, even though in most places few Afghans have arrived yet. At Mission Community Church in the conservative bedroom community of Gilbert outside Phoenix, parishioners have been collecting socks, underwear, shoes and laundry supplies.

Mars Adema, 40, said she had tried over the past year to convince the church's ministries to care for immigrants, only to hear that "this is just not our focus."

"With Afghanistan, something completely shifted," Ms. Adema said.

In a nation that is polarized on issues from abortion to the coronavirus pandemic, Afghan refugees have cleaved a special place for many Americans, especially those who worked for U.S. forces and NGOs, or who otherwise aided the U.S. effort to free Afghanistan from the Taliban.

The moment stands in contrast to the last four years when the country, led by a president who restricted immigration and enacted a ban on travel from several majority-Muslim countries, was split over whether to welcome or shun people seeking safe haven. And with much of the electorate still deeply divided over immigration, the durability of the present welcome mat remains unknown.

Polls show Republicans are still more hesitant than Democrats to receive Afghans, and some conservative politicians have warned that the rush to resettle so many risks allowing extremists to slip through the screening process. Influential commentators, like Tucker Carlson, the Fox News host, have said the refugees would dilute American culture and harm the Republican Party. Last week, he warned that the Biden administration was "flooding swing districts with refugees that they know will become loyal Democratic voters."

But a broad array of veterans and lawmakers have long regarded Afghans who helped the United States as military partners, and have long pushed to remove the red tape that has kept them in the country under constant threat from the Taliban. Images of babies being lifted over barbed-wire fences to American soldiers, people clinging to departing planes and a deadly terrorist attack against thousands massed at the airport, desperate to leave, have moved thousands of Americans to join their effort.

"For a nation that has been so divided, it feels good for people to align on a good cause," said Mike Sullivan, director of the Welcome to America Project in Phoenix. "This country probably hasn't seen anything like this since Vietnam."

Federal officials said this week that at least 50,000 Afghans who assisted the United States government or who might be targeted by the Taliban are expected to be admitted into the United States in the coming month, though the full number and the time frame of their arrival remains a work in progress. More than 31,000 Afghans have arrived already, though about half were still being processed on military bases, according to internal government documents.

Tens of thousands of Americans are helping to prepare, donating lamps, dishes and blankets, assembling beds and signing on to volunteer. There has been so much good will that some groups are struggling to handle it.

"We are telling people, 'Hold on, we are going to let you know as soon as we need the furniture,'" said Aimee Zangandou, director of refugee and immigrant services at Inspiritus, a resettlement agency in Atlanta and Savannah.

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The national infrastructure for resettling refugees has shrunk drastically over the last five years as the Trump administration slashed refugee admissions and cut federal funding to the nine contracted resettlement agencies whose caseworkers help arrivals enroll children in school, find jobs and become self-sufficient.



June Hoffman, 10, helped pack kits for Afghan families with Miry's List, a Los Angeles-based national nonprofit that helps refugees. "I like to volunteer because I feel people from different countries should be treated equal," she said. Alex Welsh for The New York Times



Miry Whitehill, founder of Miry's List, packing kits for Afghan families arriving across the country. "We truly are busier than ever, not only providing direct services but managing an unprecedented number of volunteers. People are donating, writing welcome letters, helping in every possible way," said Ms. Whitehill. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

More than 100 offices where refugees seek help when transitioning to their adopted homes had shuttered by 2019.

Now, as agencies scramble to staff up, they are leaning heavily on nonprofits like the Welcome to America Project to set up homes for arrivals, and those groups in turn are tapping into a network of churches, synagogues, Girl Scout troops and neighborhood groups whose members provide furnishings, gift cards and cash as well as volunteer hours.

Public opinion surveys have shown broad support for resettling Afghan refugees. In a Washington Post-ABC News poll released on Friday, 68 percent said they supported taking in refugees who had been subjected to security review, and 27 percent opposed it. The support included 56 percent of Republicans. Volunteer agencies said the community mobilization has crossed traditional political dividing lines.

"We have never seen anything like it," said Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, the chief executive of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, a resettlement agency that has affiliates in 22 states.

Many Afghans are expected to join family and friends in established communities in California, Texas and the Washington, D.C., metro region. But, given the large volume of arrivals, they are likely to land in any corner of the country where jobs are plentiful, housing is affordable and there is a resettlement infrastructure.

On a recent rainy day in Prince George's County, Md., Laura Thompson Osuri, executive director of Homes Not Borders, a small nonprofit, was racing between the group's storage unit to two apartment complexes where two new families would be housed. In the car, she was zipping through frantic queries on her cellphone: Where was the stuff for the crib? Who needed the table? Yikes, was that my exit?

Caroline Clarin, who lives in a conservative rural county in northern Minnesota, said she was deeply affected by her two-year experience in eastern Afghanistan teaching families agricultural techniques through an Agriculture Department program.

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Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

She has helped to relocate five families from the region, sometimes paying for their passage and temporarily housing them. Two families chose to stay near her in the Fergus Falls area, where she turned a corner of her farm into an area to process halal meat, an exercise that recently led Ms. Clarin, 55, to chase a cow three miles down a country road.

"I was concerned. I am in an absolutely fire-red area," she said. But the community, she said, "has been extremely welcoming to them."

Six years ago in September, the image of a drowned Syrian boy, face down on a beach in Turkey, awakened many Americans to the Syrian refugee crisis. But the terrorist attacks in Paris three months later, which killed 130 people and wounded hundreds, fueled a political backlash and undermined public support for refugees.



Ihsanullah Patan, center, met Caroline Clarin, left, while she was in Afghanistan with the Agriculture Department. Mr. Patan immigrated to the United States with his wife and four children in May. Antranik Tavitian for The New York Times



Ms. Clarin poured Mr. Patan a cup of tea in her home in Dalton, Minn. Antranik Tavitian for The New York Times

“There is a momentum now that I have not seen since 2015,” said Mary Kaech, who leads Phoenix Refugee Connections and advocates evangelical involvement with refugees. “I’m hoping that momentum will sustain,” she said.

But will it?

Tiffany Kapadia, 38, a realtor and mother of two young children in Phoenix, said she had seen the news from Afghanistan and had tried to put herself in the shoes of families fleeing for their lives. She has donated money to the fund-raising effort at her church.

“I am trying to peel away the negative rhetoric that comes from some news outlets and people,” she said, including from her brother, Josh Davies, who said he worried about terrorists and other criminals infiltrating the mass of arrivals, and about the impact of so many new immigrants on American culture and politics.

“Who are these people? If 1 percent of them are ISIS, it’s all it takes,” Mr. Davies said.

Kari Lake, a former television anchor who is running for governor, tweeted a warning: “Unvetted refugees incoming.”

But Gov. Doug Ducey of Arizona, a Republican, said recently that the state welcomed Afghan evacuees and was working to offer them “safety in Arizona.”

Chris St. John, a vice president at the Center for Arizona Policy, an advocacy organization that promotes conservative values, said in a blog post that he applauded the governor.

“I am not looking at this from a political perspective; I’m coming from a decidedly biblical perspective,” he said in an interview. “Could someone dangerous come? Perhaps. It is still worth the risk.”

Jason Creed, chairman of the board of Desert Springs Bible Church, said he had not heard complaints about the fund-raising drive for refugees.

“This is an issue where vaxxers and anti-vaxxers meet,” said Mr. Creed, a tax lawyer.

The church is part of a newly formed coalition of churches in Phoenix that has committed to provide families with groceries, household supplies and furniture as well as assistance navigating the bus system and filling out job applications.

“At the core of our mission is loving our neighbors,” Pastor Campbell said. “Which is not a one-time event.”

Eileen Sullivan contributed reporting. Alain Delaquérière contributed research.