



As Afghan refugees rebuild in Baltimore, the challenges are many — and so are helping hands

Alissa Zhu 6/28/22 6:00 a.m. EDT

The interpreter’s phone rings regularly and often. On the other side of the line are fellow Afghan refugees sharing the concerns and questions that come with restarting their lives in Baltimore.

The challenges are many, the interpreter said: learning another language, navigating immigration paperwork, figuring out how to use the public bus system and struggling to find a job. Many families are making this transition alone, separated from relatives and friends.



Judy Frye Jones, a volunteer English teacher at the St. Francis Neighborhood Center, has her Afghan students read aloud from lesson packets. The students work together to understand confusing words and deciding if the sentences are correct. (Taneen Momeni/The Baltimore Banner)

The man asked to be identified only by his first initial, “S,” out of fear for the safety of his family, which remains in Afghanistan. He fled the country following a Taliban takeover of the government and resettled in Baltimore in September. The former Kabul International Airport air traffic controller was hired by Luminus Network for New Americans, a nonprofit that serves immigrants and refugees in Central Maryland, to work as an interpreter at a new welcome center for Afghans in Reservoir Hill.

“Because I’m a refugee, I can feel what the problem is,” S said. “I’m not here just because they pay me. I’m here to help Afghans, with the language that I know. Because [they’re] new to the environment, they don’t know English and it’s really hard. My goal is just to just be helpful to them. At least they should know their basic rights or they should have access to those services that they should be provided.”

Of the roughly 80,000 Afghan refugees who have resettled across the United States, at least 481 have come to Baltimore, according to the International Rescue Committee, a global humanitarian aid organization responsible for resettling refugees in the city. That figure does not include Afghans who may have arrived through other resettlement agencies or have come independently.

Many of the Afghan families have settled in Reservoir Hill, a historic neighborhood bordering the southeast edge of Druid Hill Park. About 45 families have moved into apartment buildings there since late last year, according to Shakera Rahimi, the Luminus Network’s Afghan Alliance Coordinator. The influx had slowed as of early June but newcomers were still arriving, she said. Advocates estimate more than 120 Afghan refugees now live in the neighborhood.

Last August, the news was dominated by news stories of Afghan refugees fleeing in fear of losing their lives and their freedom. Today, the newcomers to Baltimore are facing new obstacles. S said many of the refugees in Reservoir Hill share concerns about the quality of the housing, safety in the neighborhood and whether financial support from their resettlement agency will run out before they’re able to become self-sufficient.

“We want to live in a safe environment and start working and stand on our feet, not dependent on an organization or anybody else,” S said.

To help get the families living in Reservoir Hill to that point, several organizations, including Luminus Network, Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church, Memorial Episcopal Church and Beth Am Synagogue. have partnered to set up a welcome center at the St. Francis Neighborhood Center, where refugees can go for legal help, translation services, English lessons and more. Dar Al-Taqwa Mosque and Maryland Afghan Refugee Crisis are other community organizations that have stepped up to help, according to Rahimi.

Rahimi herself came to the U.S. as a refugee in 2014. Formerly a physician in Afghanistan, she worked for a time as a surgeon’s assistant in the U.S. before joining Luminus Network.

“Coming to the U.S. is exciting, but challenging,” she said. “There are many new things with the system, the culture, education — everything in life that a refugee should think about. That is not easy without the community.”



Shakera Rahimi, Afghan Alliance Coordinator for Luminus Network, stands outside of the St. Francis Neighborhood Center. (Taneen Momeni/The Baltimore Banner)

Community steps up to help: “They’re treating us like their family members”

On a sunny Wednesday morning in June, volunteer English teacher Judy Frye Jones worked with a group of six Afghan students at the welcome center. She led them through reading exercises, explaining the role of adverbs and linking verbs.

Some of the students in her class speak three to four languages, Frye Jones said. A young woman whose oval face was encircled by a dark headscarf listed off: Pashtu, Dari and Urdu.

“To me, it’s incredible. And here we are, going over verbs,” Frye Jones said.



One student writes down translations of unknown words on her lesson packet. (Taneen Momeni/The Baltimore Banner)

The multilingual young woman said she wanted to learn English so she could find a job. Her husband, who asked to be identified as “A,” said volunteers such as Frye Jones and Cook are “tirelessly working day and night” to provide for the refugees.

“A” was a civil engineer in Afghanistan who contracted with the U.S. Department of Defense before he and his wife resettled in Baltimore in April. Initially he felt overwhelmed, A said. He didn’t know how to navigate the public transportation system and didn’t know where to go shopping. Others stepped in to help.

In the first week after moving into their apartment, A’s wife’s skin broke out in angry boils. At that point, they did not have health insurance, so a retired physician came over late one night to assess the situation and treat her with medication from a drug store. Another volunteer lent her car to A so he could get his driver’s license. She spent several hours with him at the testing site and celebrated with him when he passed. Others helped A circulate his resume to construction companies in Baltimore. He got an interview, an offer on the spot and began his new job as a project engineer in June.

“It’s hard to start a new life here and not have resources for yourself,” A said. “We feel very excited ... that there is someone who is taking care of us and they’re treating us like their family members. We are very grateful to them.”

As much as he appreciates the support of community residents, A doesn't envision living in Reservoir Hill long-term. He said the resettlement agency placed his family there, but their first choice had been Ellicott City.

"The families in [this building], every one of them is trying to leave this area and go to safer areas," he said. "I'm not going to purchase much more stuff for my home. I'm temporarily here and going to move as soon as possible."



A refugee who lives in Reservoir Hill, who asked to be identified as "A" because he fears for the safety of his family in Afghanistan, looks out of his apartment window. He and his wife have experienced problems with mice and other pests while living there. (Taneen Momeni/The Baltimore Banner)

Driving the newcomers to think about leaving just months after they've arrived are the same concerns shared by many other Baltimoreans — [housing quality and public safety](#).

A and his wife have been waging battle against mice in their apartment, in what advocates say is a poorly maintained building. More critically, A said, he and many of the newcomers don't feel secure in the neighborhood. He said he hears gunshots nearly every day.

"It's very scary for them, coming traumatized from a country where violence was so prevalent. To be worried about the same thing here is really a problem," said Barbara Cook, chair of the Brown Memorial Ministry of Welcome and the retired physician who helped treat A's wife. Cook said volunteers are working to make families such as A's feel safer because they believe having Afghans settle in Reservoir Hill would benefit the neighborhood and increase diversity.

"The purpose of everything we're doing is to help these folks ... get launched so they can take care of their families, live independently, learn English and be comfortable here in a way they were not comfortable in their own countries," Cook said. "We want them to feel welcome here and be able to make their homes here."

Faith-based groups are currently trying to raise \$10,000 for projects, Cook said. The money would go toward gift cards for families to get back-to-school clothes for their children, a Lyft account so refugees can use the ride-share service to attend medical appointments and go shopping, supplies for English and sewing classes, and a contingency fund for unexpected emergencies.

Supporting the newcomers is a job for the entire community. The Rev. Grey Maggiano, rector of Memorial Episcopal Church, said residents shouldn't treat Afghans as outsiders.

"It's a new thing for people to see Afghans, to see women in headscarves walking down the street, to see people speaking a different language in the park," Maggiano said. "When I see them, I try to say hi and make sure they feel welcome and make sure Baltimore residents see these refugees as people and part of the community, and not just an oddity."

Some Afghan refugees feel neglected by resettlement agency

Another major player in the lives of Afghan families as they resettle in Baltimore is the International Rescue Committee. It is one of nine federally designated resettlement agencies that receive money from the government to provide services for refugees in the U.S.

Most of the refugees that arrive in Baltimore are resettled by the organization, which helps them enroll in public benefits, such as food stamps, cash assistance and medical assistance. It pairs them with caseworkers, helps them find housing and employment, offers them free English classes through community colleges and helps pay for rent for a few months.

Some refugees expressed frustration with the interactions they've had with the group.

"They are not cooperating all all. They have [case] workers, but they never respond to their phones," said S, the interpreter. He added that many of the refugees have experienced long delays in receiving their employment authorization and Social Security cards, which are needed to find a job. Meanwhile, they're concerned the time-limited financial assistance they receive from the organization to pay rent and utilities will run out before they're able to work, he said. The added stresses make adjustment to their new lives more difficult and the help of other organizations all the more important, S said.

Ruben Chandrasekar, executive director of the International Rescue Committee in Maryland, defended the organization's work. He said caseworkers try to return phone calls and messages within 72 hours, the employment authorization document delays are a chronic nationwide problem that is outside of the control of resettlement agencies, and the organization does its best to stretch the limited federal funding it receives for each client. He said the organization will continue to provide rental assistance to Afghans who have not been able to work.

"We have been working very hard to serve our clients and are responding to an unprecedented emergency. The last time the U.S. government accepted so many refugees in such a short amount of time was immediately after the fall of Saigon," Chandrasekar said. "The Afghan crisis brought lots of people in a short amount of time and I think we've responded as well as we could."

In the months following the exodus of refugees from Afghanistan, the International Rescue Committee needed to increase staff quickly, after experiencing historically low numbers of refugees admitted to the U.S. under President Donald Trump's administration. The organization has since doubled the size of its team in Baltimore, Chandrasekar said.

"We are actively helping our clients get jobs and other services," Chandrasekar said. " ... There are lots of success stories in the work we're doing, clients who are working and leading happy and productive lives."

The reality for immigrants is that success in a new country can look very different from success at home. As Afghan refugees rebuild for the long haul, they know there will be many more difficulties ahead.

"The most challenging thing in the U.S. is finding a job relevant to your career," said Sayed Abdul Wakil Musleh, an Afghan lawyer who recently resettled in Baltimore.

Musleh had dedicated his life's work to improving his country, he said. He had worked at the Supreme Court of Afghanistan, defended Afghan women's rights, and was employed by the country's Ministry of Economy. But when the Taliban took over the government, he knew his life was at risk. The escape from Afghanistan was harrowing, Musleh said, as he was shot by U.S. troops with rubber bullets and narrowly avoided a suicide bombing.



Sayed Abdul Wakil Musleh, an Afghan lawyer and refugee who now lives in Baltimore, sits in his office at the University of Baltimore School of Law. (Courtesy of Sayed Wakil Musleh)

In other ways, he was fortunate. Friends in the U.S. helped him find a way out of Afghanistan and get a one-year placement as a visiting scholar jointly sponsored by the University of Maryland and the University of Baltimore, he said.

He urged Americans to give newcomers a chance to reach their

full potential, suggesting that universities grant scholarships to young refugees: "Our bright and educated youth coming to the U.S., they should be given equal opportunities as others."

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