

# Connecticut nonprofit preparing to resettle Afghan refugees who aided U.S. troops

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## FULL TEXT

At a moment's notice, a New Haven nonprofit is poised to prepare homes and warm welcomes for Afghan families who have become refugees of Taliban violence by working alongside U.S. armed forces.

One worker and his family will be arriving in Connecticut from Afghanistan on Aug. 11, and at least one more family will come to the New Haven area after arriving in Fort Lee, Virginia, says Ann O'Brien, community engagement director of Integrated Refugee and Immigration Services (IRIS).

They are among 2,500 people from Afghanistan who have been granted Special Immigrant Visas for having served as translators or doing other work for U.S. troops or diplomats, placing themselves and their extended families at risk in the process. Some have ties to residents of the New Haven and Hartford areas, where IRIS has resettled more than 500 Afghan citizens since 2017, creating tight-knit, supportive communities in both regions.

"The families that came in the years or two beforehand, they remember that so clearly and they're super intuitive as to what the newly arriving families need, and of course they want to ease that entry if in any way they can," O'Brien said.

IRIS is also hiring several case managers and an employment specialist to work out of a new Hartford-area office and support the growing community in the capital city. That office will open as early as Oct. 1.

"I'm thrilled that Connecticut is beginning to welcome Afghans who risked their lives to support our troops, our diplomats and our allies, and I'm very grateful to IRIS for working hard to place them here in Connecticut," Mayor Luke Bronin, a Navy veteran who served in Afghanistan, said Thursday. "Our entire country should welcome these refugees with open arms, not just because we owe it to them, but because they'll be an asset to any community they live in."

O'Brien says IRIS doesn't know how many Afghan refugees will ultimately arrive in Connecticut.

The Biden administration also has thousands more pending applications to consider as the crisis in Afghanistan worsens ahead of the U.S. military's scheduled withdrawal from the country this month.

When the nonprofit does get a new case, it typically has just a few days or weeks of notice before the family or individual arrives.

The short notice makes the preparation for resettlement a chaotic process, just like the rest of a refugee's journey, O'Brien said. But the case managers, including former refugees themselves, try to create as stable and welcoming an environment as they can, O'Brien said.

IRIS maintains relationships with landlords and furniture stores so it can quickly find and furnish apartments before a refugee arrives.

If the family doesn't speak English, a translator is the first person to greet them. And no matter what, a family from the same ethnic background is the first to feed them, delivering a culturally appropriate hot meal to their apartment when they arrive.

Mohammad Daad Seweri, of West Haven, said that first meal brought a lot of comfort to him and his family when they settled in the New Haven area in 2017 on Afghan Special Immigrant Visas.

From 2004 to 2009, Seweri had worked as an interpreter for the U.S. Army in Helmand province, a hotbed of the Taliban and opium production. After he received a threat, Seweri took his family to Kabul and worked in a foreign

embassy, hoping one day they'd return to a safer Helmand.

"Things never got better," he said.

Seweri was able to leave the country with his wife and 6-year-old son, settling in Connecticut because Seweri's U.S. tie, his brother, lived in the New Haven area. That first day, his brother brought over a rice dish with meat, called palaw, and helped stock their kitchen with enough groceries for a week.

Seweri still worries for the safety of his parents, siblings and their families in Afghanistan, saying the Taliban would consider them complicit in his decision to work with the U.S. military years ago.

"If they find out, which they will, [my family is] not safe at all," Seweri said.

Most refugees from his country, and likely others, feel the same, wishing they could extend their refugee status to the family they had to leave behind.

Seweri, who became a case manager for IRIS, is conscious of all those worries as he works with clients.

"Mentally, this is not an easy thing," he said. "This is not a choice they make but they are forced and compelled to leave the country of origin and leave all their memory, leave all their relatives, their family behind and come to a new country and start from scratch."

To make the transition smoother, IRIS gives each family a cell phone so they can reach their case manager and shows them how to take a bus from their new home to the closest grocery store. On the way, their case manager tries to find them a store that will have some more traditional ingredients from their culture.

IRIS also helps them apply to social service benefits, connects them with a health care provider, and provides some financial assistance until the clients find jobs.

Seweri is hoping he gets to work with more refugees in the weeks and months ahead.

"Those people coming here, they add value to the American society, and American society is getting richer and more diverse. That is one of the biggest assets of the United States," he said. "They are very hard-working communities, and they definitely contribute enormously, and not only culturally, socially but economically to this country."

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