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With Thousands of Afghans Still Unsettled, US Focuses On Ukraine Refugees

BY [JALEN SMALL](#) 3/29/22

What Happens To Afghan Refugees Coming To The U.S.? Vetting Process Explained

U.S. **AFGHAN REFUGEES** **UKRAINE**

With President Joe Biden's recent pledge to resettle 100,000 Ukrainian refugees into the U.S., resettlement organizations and groups are under tremendous pressure.

Although these groups are excited about the the opportunity to welcome and help displaced people in need, some have expressed concern that the resettlement infrastructure is operating above its capacity and will be unable to handle an additional influx of refugees.

Harv Hilowitz, who has aided resettlement efforts in New York's Hudson Valley region, worries that with thousands of new arrivals, U.S. officials might "forget about the Afghans."

"The U.S. government is working with nine or ten large immigration agencies," he told *Newsweek*. "It is not their fault, but even together with these large immigration agencies, they don't have enough capacity to handle this."

The traditional resettlement infrastructure was decimated under then-President [Donald Trump](#) as his administration slashed funding to the program and decreased the refugee admissions cap by more than 75% from that of the Obama administration.

The system has yet to recover. Although the refugee admissions cap was raised to 125,000 in 2022, the U.S. has only admitted 6,500 people so far this year, according to the Migration Policy Institute. Despite making inroads to "undo the damage of the last four years," some claim that the Biden administration has been too slow to rebuild. The dangers of this delay have been highlighted during the months-long resettlement effort for more than 80,000 refugees from Afghanistan.

While some Afghan refugees, especially those with prior experience or connections in the United States, have been able to adjust to life in the U.S. more smoothly, a significant number of people are still missing out on some of the basic resources promised to them by the government, said community activist Satar Mohammed.

A native of Afghanistan, Mohammed told *Newsweek* that he has been in touch with dozens of recent arrivals who have been placed in substandard housing and have yet to receive any "welcome checks" from the government. He also said that the support for these groups is slowly dwindling.

"I see what is happening in Ukraine and my heart goes out to those people," he said. "But they have been treated much better than some of the refugee groups that already live here. When it comes to Afghan refugees, they have been thrown away like garbage," he added.

To illustrate his point, Mohammed told *Newsweek* about an experience he had in Albany, New York. After an influx of newly arrived Afghans came to the area, dozens of families were given temporary housing in a local Ramada Plaza hotel.

His faith-based community organization visited the hotel to provide basic assistance and supplies. But once they arrived, he said that he was struck by the tremendous level of unmet needs these people were facing.

"Their problems were above the limits of the local Muslim community to help," Mohammed said. "The rooms were overcrowded, and they were still struggling to secure their working papers, social security numbers, housing and Medicaid."

After spending months in the U.S., few eligible individuals at this hotel had even received Refugee Cash Assistance, a federal program created to provide cash assistance for up to eight months after a refugee's arrival date.

"I started digging into it a bit more, and found out their welcome money was being used towards the hotel," he told *Newsweek*. "I spoke with this one guy with a family of nine. When he went to the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, they only gave him a \$25 [Walmart](#) gift card."

Mohammed said he has heard similar stories from Afghans in nearby cities like Bennington and Utica. "If you did not have housing for them, and you did not have everything prepared for them, why did you bring this family here?" he asked.

Hilowitz said that while well-intentioned, the process for resettling Afghan refugees has been mired from the beginning. "They simply could not handle this tidal wave of people coming from Afghanistan," he said. "So they started to pair families with local immigration agencies, nonprofit groups, church groups, veterans organizations and community organizations ... and even that was not enough."

"So then they came up with this idea of the community sponsorship hub," he added.

The Community Sponsorship Hub, which Hilowitz works with, is a community-sponsorship system designed to pair newly arrived refugees with small volunteer groups of Americans called "Circles." It originally began as an emergency measure, but has quickly become a key element of the U.S. resettlement strategy.

Explaining the typical resettlement process, Sarah Krouse, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Community Sponsorship Hub, said, "Traditionally, resettlement has been done by resettlement agencies through a contract with the Department of State."

"However, in this response," she explained, "the U.S. government engaged in partnerships with additional actors in order to provide support to the significant number of people that were arriving in a short period of time."

So far, the program has resettled hundreds of individuals in nearly 30 states across the country, Krause said. She believes these sponsorship circles are a great example of the willingness of Americans to step up and support others in their time of need.

"Sponsorship Circles help foster a better understanding of refugee resettlement in the United States and creates a sense of ownership in the process," she said. "There is such a diversity of groups that want to provide support," Krause added. "That, to me, is really exciting."

Despite the success of this program and the resettlement of many, she acknowledged that more needs to be done, and that some Afghans have slipped through the cracks. Thousands of newly arrived Afghans remain in poor housing conditions and without much government support, according to both Hilowitz and Mohammed.

"Some of them are on the verge of homelessness," Hilowitz said, "Many of them are penniless, without jobs or any substantial income, and many of them no longer have ties to any immigration agencies." These individuals are especially vulnerable to being left behind. While programs like the Community Sponsorship Hub promote greater engagement from Americans, Mohammed is advocating for increased representation for his own people.

"I would love to be represented in Congress, so I can give testimony about what these people are going through," he said. "My plea is that we do this for the benefit of both countries, along with protecting freedom and human rights," Mohammed said. "All of these people are coming here, so we must have someone willing to hear their voices."

"Someone needs to just listen," he added.



Afghani refugees Israr, 26, and his wife Sayeda, 23, make a morning smoothie of fruit, nuts and milk, an American concept they have been trying for a few weeks instead of tea, at their new apartment in Charlestown, Massachusetts on February 21, 2022. Though he worked as a U.S. Army interpreter, Israr and his wife are in the United States on what is known as "Humanitarian Parole", a "tenuous legal status" according to resettlement organizations, that offers only two years residence. After an arduous, months-long journey that took them from Kabul via Qatar to an army base in Texas, the pair settled early this year in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood where they were taken under the wing of a couple they now call their second "mama and papa." PHOTO BY JOSEPH PREZIOSO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES