

# Helping resettle Afghans fits 'mission' of Nashville Catholic Charities

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (CNS) – Over the course of the next six months, Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Nashville will help resettle 150 Afghans into local communities as part of the effort to help them escape Taliban rule under the U.S. State Department's Afghan Placement Assistance Program.

"We serve people because we can address their needs, and addressing the humanitarian needs of refugees has been part of the mission of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Nashville since its founding in the early 1960s," said Rick Musacchio, diocesan director of communications.

"Catholic Charities works in collaboration with federal partners to make the resettlement process manageable and not overwhelming for local communities," he added.

Kellye Branson, director of Refugee and Immigration Services, is heading the effort on behalf of Catholic Charities.

"We had a really quick turnaround to think about it. We were asked how many we could accommodate," Branson said.

"To get everybody's thoughts about what might be possible," she reached out to several entities, she said, including the Nashville mayor's office, metro-area schools, health officials, the Tennessee Office for Refugees, the Nashville International Center for Empowerment and other local organizations that serve refugees.

"I looked at how many refugees we were projected to get over the next year, how many refugees we've served in the past and 150 was where we landed as a number that we felt comfortable

accepting over the next six months, that we could garner enough support for, and that we could manage when it came to providing services,” she told the Tennessee Register, Nashville’s diocesan newspaper.

At the beginning of September, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security implemented Operation Allies Welcome “to support vulnerable Afghans, including those who worked alongside us in Afghanistan for the past two decades, as they safely resettle in the United States,” according to the official Department of Homeland Security website.

This operation led to implementation of the Afghan Placement Assistance Program, or APA.

Throughout the process, the Afghans are vetted and screened by DHS, which includes “biometric and biographic screenings conducted by intelligence, law enforcement, and counterterrorism professionals,” before they come to the United States, according to the department.

Once the Afghans arrive in the U.S., they are further processed at one of eight military bases. This consists of medical screenings, including testing for COVID-19, receiving vaccinations, applying for immigration status and more as coordinated by the State Department.

Frances Anderson, who is state refugee health coordinator with the Tennessee Office for Refugees, deployed to Fort Bliss, Texas, to assist the State Department in recent processing efforts.

“My time spent at Bliss was intense and impactful,” Anderson said. “The evacuees have experienced a tragic transit, and their journeys are not yet complete. I cannot begin to feel or understand the trauma that they are continuously experiencing.

“The hope that I saw among the guests of the base and hear from colleagues and friends from Afghanistan is a huge

motivator," she said. "I am incredibly grateful for the compassion and interest across the United States to assist in this humanitarian work."

Once all processes are complete and the State Department designates a destination city, local resettlement agencies such as Catholic Charities determines whether to accept the case and continue the resettlement process.

"If a refugee or, in this case, Afghan, has a friend or family member already living in the United States, they will request to be resettled near them," Branson said. "Otherwise, usually the nine national resettlement agencies divide the cases up and determine the destination city based on capacity assessments each local resettlement agency fills out each year.

"In the assessments," she explained, "we let our national affiliates know what communities are established here, what languages are spoken, resources for English classes, health care, housing costs, etc. We have seen the benefits to our city and our country of the clients that we serve."

Previous studies have shown that the economic benefit to communities that welcome refugees was many times more than what it cost the state to resettle them, she added.

In the APA program, Afghans receive 30 to 90 days of assistance, case management and \$1,225 per individual from the State Department, Branson said.

"We will be helping them establish housing, furnishing it, taking them to get their Social Security cards, getting the kids enrolled in school, and following up on any medical needs or mental health needs they might have, and hopefully be able to quickly get them employed," Branson said. "The \$1,225 is to cover that whole time."

These refugees currently are not eligible for any state or

federal benefits or assistance beyond the APA program, Branson said, "so efforts are being made to develop private support to provide more of the long-term assistance that refugees and (Special Immigrant Visa holders) usually get."

Volunteers are needed, Branson said, and she described three volunteer roles "we're looking for the most."

One is family mentors "who would basically serve as welcoming ambassadors for a family and help them learn about Nashville, get to the market, work with them on learning English if they need to, connect them to local shops and the library, and just help them acculturate and learn about life in Nashville," Branson said.

Second is transportation assistance to get clients to and from appointments.

Third is housing setup, she said, such as helping move in furniture, shopping for items still needed or going to an apartment designated for a family before that family moves in to prepare it, even "rinsing off the dishes that have been sitting in our warehouse" but are now there for the family's use.

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*Peterson is on the staff of the Tennessee Register, newspaper of the Diocese of Nashville.*