



TESTIMONY OF

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

TEAM RUBICON

before the

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT, MANAGEMENT, AND ACCOUNTABILITY
AND
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BORDER SECURITY, FACILATION, AND OPERATIONS**

**“OPERATION ALLIES WELCOME: EXAMINING DHS’S EFFORTS TO RESETTLE
VULNERABLE AFGHANS”**

OCTOBER 21, 2021

Good afternoon, Chairman Correa, Chairwoman Barragán, Ranking Member Meijer, Ranking Member Higgins, and Members of the Subcommittees, I am Art delaCruz, the CEO of Team Rubicon and a 22-year military veteran. On behalf of Team Rubicon, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the efforts to resettle Afghan families.

TEAM RUBICON MISSION

Team Rubicon is a national disaster response organization that mobilizes military veterans and civilians to help communities prepare, respond, and recover from natural disasters and humanitarian crises. Founded in 2010 in the wake of the Haiti earthquake, our nonprofit has grown from 8 volunteers to over 150,000. These men and women, the majority of whom are military veterans, deploy at a moment’s notice to address unmet needs in communities across the country immediately following floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, fires, and on a limited basis, to the same internationally. From Hurricane Sandy to Hurricane Ida, from the tornadoes of Moore, OK to the derechos in Iowa, to international responses in the Philippines, Haiti, or Mozambique, Team Rubicon is a humanitarian organization that seeks to alleviate suffering and provide a safer and more stable tomorrow. We are committed to serving people who need us in times of emergency and that means we do not turn away people who need help.

Team Rubicon responds to all phases of the disaster life cycle, from mitigation efforts to lessen the impacts of wildfires in the west coast, expedient home repair to get homeowners back home after devastating hurricanes, and long-term resilient home rebuilding to ensure residents can weather the next disaster safely at home. To date, Team Rubicon has conducted almost 1,000 operations since our founding in 2010.

In addition to responding to traditional disasters, our volunteers, also called Greyshirts, have served in other capacities to meet needs associated with the pandemic and COVID-19. Broadly speaking, we define a disaster as anything that overwhelms the resources of a community. Since March of 2020 and in over 300 communities across the country, our volunteers mobilized to aid in staffing and managing food banks, setting up and facilitating testing sites, assisting with financial aid distribution, expeditiously setting up and manning domestic COVID field hospitals, and providing medical decompression services in places such as Navajo Nation. These efforts ran simultaneously as we continued to deliver disaster response and rebuild services in core response areas, such as a continued presence in Louisiana following the hurricane response 2020 record storm season. In December of 2020, Team Rubicon added vaccine distribution to our operation set. With the approval of vaccines under emergency use authorization, we partnered with agencies such as FEMA and the Veterans Administration to manage fixed and mobile sites to ensure equitable vaccination distribution across the country. A consortium of veteran service organizations came together as the Veterans Coalition for Vaccination (VCV) to create a nationwide network of veteran volunteers to serve as a resource to augment the efforts to convert vaccines to vaccinations. To date, Team Rubicon has assisted in distributing over 1.6 million vaccines to over 105 cities.

I would like to take a moment to emphasize that most of our volunteers are military veterans who work alongside first responders and civilians from all backgrounds. Our veterans bring unique skills and expertise to the forefront of the execution of our mission. I'd be remiss if I did not take time to explain that it is not their military specialties that bring Team Rubicon success, it is the cumulative training coupled with their penchant to continue to serve that makes delivery of our services possible. If you view the experience in the Navy, Army, Air Force, Marines, or Coast Guard as unique schooling, you'll be able to understand that these men and women are graduates of classes on decision making, leadership, decisiveness, resource management, safety, process development, training – and many others that allow a mission to be developed and successfully executed. As you know, veteran service after taking off the uniform is legacy and something this Nation has seen benefit from since our earliest conflicts. Men and women who wore the uniform of our military services tend to continue to find ways to serve and contribute to our society.

EFFORTS TO SUPPORT AFGHAN RESETTLEMENT

As the Nation watched the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent evacuations and associated efforts, the veteran bias for service was once again prompted into action. To be clear, it is not my intent or an area of expertise to discuss the withdrawal operations or efforts. Rather, I would like to take this time to point out that Team Rubicon originated post 9/11, and many of our veteran volunteers deployed to Afghanistan and forged strong relationships with Afghan translators and linguists. While processing complex emotions of the withdrawal, our volunteers,

like many veterans across the country, were eager to assist their Afghan allies in resettling. Images of men, women, and children on C-17s as they took off from Kabul, served as the catalysts for thinking about what mission might lie next for our volunteers and how they could positively impact the futures of the Afghan families. What might be the next task at hand? How could an organization with many veterans with first-hand experience contribute?

Team Rubicon was asked to consider potential roles our volunteers could serve in the Afghan resettlement efforts. Initially, we met with organizations convened by the State Department that included FEMA, Department of Defense leadership, leadership from Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs), and base leadership. Ultimately, Team Rubicon decided, in collaboration with these agencies, that an area where we could have immediate and direct impact was in the management and distribution of donated goods. Though we had no core mission centered on donation management, it was clear that the needs would be urgent and great.

After the suicide bombing, the evacuees were limited with what they could bring aboard the evacuation flights. Many literally fled with the clothes on their backs and if lucky, had a backpack of belongings. They would arrive with nothing so it would be critical to meet their immediate and basic needs, including a change of clothing. Other items such as toiletries, diapers, and baby formula would also be priority. With no clear mechanism, process, or authority to receive these donations from the community, partners or corporate sponsors, Team Rubicon had a massive task ahead. The enablers built during our COVID operations, allowed us to quickly pivot and problem solve in the space. Our tech team built out an inventory system to keep track of donations and meet needs as they arose. We were initially asked to support two bases with donated goods management and that quickly increased to seven bases, along with the management of donation shipments to Holloman Air Force Base.

Team Rubicon began our operations on August 30, 2021, under the guidance of the Defense Coordinating Officers at the respective bases. Within days, the volunteers were able to begin collection operations. They collected items based on the unique needs of each base, established locations to collect and sort donations, and created processes for needed items to be shipped to the bases for distribution.

At Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, we designed a manual that could be replicated at Camp Atterbury, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, Dona Ana Range, Quantico and Fort Pickett. Donations drives were launched in larger cities to collect donations en masse at the United Center in Chicago and at the Minnesota Twins' Target Field Stadium. An adhoc partnership was formed with community organizations; the Salvation Army, Goodwill, local churches and community leaders served as local donation points and leadership teams at Camp Atterbury designed packing and sorting processes that were implemented statewide. Each base established an Amazon wishlist to meet the ever-changing needs on the ground. At the time of this writing, over four million items, at an estimated value of \$15.5 million, have been distributed and 2.8 million items were sorted and ready for distribution. These donated goods came in from across the country and Team Rubicon served to communicate needed items, received the donations, and ensured they were distributed on the bases. It was, and still is, heartening to see the outpouring of

support from communities and people across the country and we continue to receive donations even as we speak.

In addition to donated goods management, Team Rubicon is serving at all points of the resettlement process including providing cultural advisors to ensure that all donated items are culturally appropriate. Further, we provided logistics support and translators as Afghan families first arrived via Dulles Airport. Finally, we are currently setting up housing units for families as they move from bases into communities and anticipate this occurring more frequently across the country as the resettlement process continues.

As we look forward, we understand that the transition into communities across the US will require a whole of community effort. We have started conversations with Welcome.US and the Operation Allies Welcome to explore how our capabilities can be extended to meet additional needs.

I will conclude by stating that what Team Rubicon has done is a small portion of the work being conducted across the country on behalf of the Afghan families. Other nonprofits, veteran service organizations, and coalitions have answered and continue to answer the call to ensure the resettlement process continues. Families will leave these bases and begin new lives in communities across the country. Housing and employment, schooling, building new friendships, establishing community relationships, and creating new bonds to our culture while retaining their own will all be efforts that we can impact. Veterans, with their unique connection and bonds from serving with the Afghans, have the ability to lead and activate the upswell of support that will continue and grow in the coming months and years across this country, and I am confident they are up to the task.

CONCLUSION

Members of the Committees, thank you again for the opportunity to share Team Rubicon's mission, the ongoing needs of Afghan families in U.S., and our efforts to support these needs. To date 1,081 volunteers have deployed to support this effort and our volunteers will continue to raise their hands as needed.

We look forward to continuing to work with Congress and government partners. I look forward to answering any questions you may have and working with the Committees in the future.