



**Operation Allies Welcome:
Examining DHS's Efforts to Resettle Vulnerable Afghans**

October 21, 2021

Dear Subcommittee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today. My name is Naheed Samadi Bahram. I am the US Country Director at Women for Afghan Women, the largest Afghan women's rights organization globally. We are based in Queens, New York where we support Afghan and other immigrant communities through social, educational and legal assistance.

We appreciate the launch of Operation Allies Welcome, which is an incredibly important initiative to safely resettle Afghans in the United States. Women for Afghan Women and the Afghan community at large are very appreciative of the resources and efforts that have been made thus far.

Some positive feedback included Afghans expressing their gratitude for the prompt responses and assistance when reaching out to government departments with questions or requesting information. Listening sessions have been extremely valuable to the community to build on this important communication channel.

The Afghan community and our allies have also been instrumental in providing refugees with the assistance they need. Community members are donating essential items, providing translation services, fundraising for resettlement efforts, and filling in gaps where needed. Many individuals continue to reach out to us, eager to do more to support incoming refugees.

Through our observations with the resettlement efforts these last several weeks, we have three key recommendations that we hope we can collaborate together on:

Our first recommendation is to strongly increase involvement of Afghans in decision-making processes and leverage their expertise.



As you may already know, the vast majority of Afghans in the US came through the refugee and asylum programs, which saved their lives and gave them hope. We must ensure that Afghans are not only present when making decisions on organizing and strengthening resettlement efforts, but that their voices and lived experiences are being prioritized.

There are Afghans in the US that have a tremendous amount of expertise in diverse fields such as interpretation, operations and management, communications, medical and emergency services, law, and so much more. Operation Allies Welcome can greatly benefit from increasing the role our community plays in making key decisions on resettlement.

For example, in the initial stages of this initiative, many unaccompanied Afghan minors were processed and connected to services that did not have any Dari or Pashto language services. WAW hopes to serve as a bridge and ensure that government and non-governmental agencies have the linguistic and cultural competencies that are integral to resettlement efforts. In fact, we have already reached out to organizations in the New York area to see how we could provide our assistance.

Our second recommendation is to assess and evaluate the conditions present at military bases where Afghan refugees are waiting to be processed.

We have received various feedback based on the different locations Afghan refugees are waiting. Some concerning stories were shared that we wanted to bring to your attention.

One individual shared that her family member who was waiting at a military base for processing was on her period and repeatedly requested pads, but was not provided with these supplies until 24 hours later. Another family shared that a pregnant woman waited in line for a few hours to receive food, but when she did receive her portion it was not enough nutrition for her and she began to lose weight, therefore her husband had to share his portion of food with her.



We fully acknowledge the challenges in providing resources to a large group of arrivals, but are eager and willing to support Afghan refugees in receiving basic needs during this transition. Please let us know how we can assist.

Our last recommendation during this period where thousands of new families are arriving, is for Operation Allies Welcome to strengthen partnerships with organizations and groups in addition to the nine resettlement agencies.

Women for Afghan Women has been in close contact with Lutheran Social Services in Virginia as well as five resettlement agencies in New York. We are supplementing resettlement needs by assessing what other types of support and items are needed for newly arrived families.

This model of partnership can be replicated in all areas where Afghans are resettled. During this time when many groups have limited capacity, we can increase cooperation among government and resettlement agencies, community-based organizations, religious institutions, and Afghan community members that are very eager to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate support and fill in gaps as needed.

Thousands of Afghan professionals are available and very willing to provide their skills and expertise. We look forward to finding ways to plug them into Operation Allies Welcome and leveraging all resources to successfully resettle our new Afghan community members.

I greatly appreciate this opportunity to testify in front of you all today, thank you for your time, consideration, and support of the Afghan people. We truly appreciate it.