

As the first Afghan families arrived in Mass. this weekend, the state faces a historic humanitarian challenge

By [John Hilliard](#) and [Nick Stoico](#) Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, Updated September 26, 2021, 8:41 p.m.



Members of a family of five Afghan evacuees were greeted by members of the Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center at Logan Airport on Sunday. JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

As the first two families fleeing Afghanistan arrived in Massachusetts over the weekend, the state was gearing up for what advocates say will be a historic resettlement effort for at least 1,100 people who will need help with housing, health care, education, and other basics to rebuild their lives.

The scope of the humanitarian crisis has not been seen in decades, advocates said on Sunday. Nationwide, some 65,000 Afghans will be arriving in the next few months and perhaps another 30,000 over the coming year.

The challenge posed is exacerbated by the abrupt fall of Afghanistan's government to the Taliban last month, prompting a desperate scramble out of a country that had been wracked by more than 20 years of war, involving the United States. As a result, tens of thousands of people — many of whom are living on American military bases across the country and overseas — are seeking new homes in this country.

“It's unprecedented — the last major humanitarian effort like this was after the Vietnam War,” said Jeff Kinney, with the Worcester-based Ascentria Care Alliance, which is working to bring about 400 evacuees to Worcester and Western Massachusetts.

“But this one is massive because it happened so fast, and the resettlement is going to have to happen so fast,” Kinney said.

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The challenge facing Massachusetts has sparked what is being dubbed an “all hands on deck” response as cities like Worcester are organizing community-level efforts to provide temporary housing, line up volunteers to collect donations, and identify businesses willing to offer work to evacuees.

Meg Gallo, with the Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center in Boston, said the effort has been a huge undertaking. The organization is working to bring about 150 to 250 people to the state between now and March, she said.

But they have been getting help, according to Gallo.

“The people of Massachusetts have been absolutely phenomenal; there has been an outpouring of support,” she said.

A family of three was the first to arrive in Massachusetts on Friday, followed by another family Sunday night, according to advocates.

The family that arrived Sunday was greeted with hugs and handshakes from Mariam Gas, founder of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center in Boston, and Mary Truong, director of the office of refugees and immigrants at the Department of Health

and Human Services.

The family included a mother and father with three young children, a boy and two girls. Gallo asked that their names not be published out of concern for the safety of relatives still in Afghanistan.



Members of a family of five Afghan evacuees were greeted by Miriam Gas (above left), founder of the Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center in Boston, and Mary Truong, director of the state office of refugees and immigrants, at Logan Airport. JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Now that they've reached Massachusetts, and are expected to resettle in Worcester, the father said he was looking forward to enrolling his children in school.

“That is very important to me,” he said, speaking through a translator. “I [also] want my wife to be calm and not scared. We just want to start a peaceful life here in America.”

Gallo said the father had worked with the United States while living in Afghanistan.

The father said he was living in fear as he watched the Taliban topple different areas of Afghanistan before they took the capital city of Kabul in August.

“It was very scary for me and my family,” he said. “I’m so grateful to the people that helped me get out of there with my family. I’m so happy. And I’m thankful to the people that are welcoming us here.”

Those new arrivals are expected to join hundreds of Afghan refugees and Special Interest Visa holders who worked with the US government already living in the state. Massachusetts has welcomed more than 15,000 refugees from around the world over the past decade, according to advocates.

The new evacuees from Afghanistan include people who fled the Taliban-controlled country due to the threat of persecution, including the oppression of women, violence, and death.

Many of them assisted American military and government officials during the war, along with their families, said Tim Garvin, president and chief executive of the United Way of Central Massachusetts, which is part of the Worcester area response.

“In their own way, they are American patriots,” Garvin said. “I’m proud about what we are doing to support them.”

Governor Charlie Baker, and other leaders, said they support efforts to bring evacuees to the state. Last month, Baker said in a tweet that the state would be “ready to assist Afghan refugees seeking safety and peace in America.”

In a statement released over the weekend, a Baker spokesman reiterated that support.

“Massachusetts is pleased to welcome the first Afghan evacuees to the Commonwealth, and looks forward to working with the federal government and local nonprofits who serve these populations as additional evacuees arrive in the coming weeks and months,” the statement said.

Daniel Pereira, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition, said Sunday that the United States has a responsibility to Afghans who seek to resettle here.

“We fully support the right of these Afghan refugees to come to Boston, to Massachusetts and we hope that all of the organizations and the government here can help them build a new life here in the Commonwealth,” he said.

Another challenge is a bureaucratic issue.

Many of the Afghan evacuees don’t qualify for refugee status under US law, and are instead considered “humanitarian parolees,” said Jeffrey Thielman, the president and chief executive officer of the International Institute of New England. The difference means that many evacuees don’t qualify for refugee benefits, making their transition to new lives in the United States all the more difficult.

Massachusetts officials are trying to address some of the shortcomings.

State lawmakers are working on legislation that would offer Afghan evacuees access to MassHealth coverage, advocates said Sunday.

State lawmakers are also considering a \$12 million proposal to provide more financial aid to Afghan evacuees, and fund services, including more caseworkers to help them access essential services.

Thielman said the additional funding is vital to help people with the transition — from learning English and job skills, to navigating school systems and health care — and also to hire case workers and other staff to assist.

His organization is seeking to place about 200 people in Boston, Lowell, and New Bedford, plus 50 more in New Hampshire.

The funding proposal is backed by Ascentria, IINE, along with other resettlement groups working to bring Afghan evacuees to the state — Catholic Charities offices in Boston and Springfield, Jewish Family Services in Metrowest and Western Massachusetts, and the Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center.

The proposed funding would include \$7.5 million to cover the cost of individual one-time \$5,000 payments for each of up to 1,500 Afghan evacuees in Massachusetts, according to the organizations. Most of the money would help cover the costs of clothing, food, and housing, while one-quarter would support resettlement providers to aid them, according to the proposal.

Another \$4.5 million would be allocated for legal assistance to help people with their immigration status and provide an eventual pathway to citizenship, the groups said.

Currently, the evacuees would receive a one-time payment of roughly \$1,000 per

person through a federal program, according to Thielman.

Evacuees “left Afghanistan very quickly, and they have not had a lot of time to adjust for life in this country,” Thielman said. “If we want people to have an accelerated process of integration in our state, we’ve got to provide them with extra resources — and it will come back to help us.”

As the state prepares for the influx of newcomers, some communities are getting ready to greet the new residents.

Advocates said they anticipated those families arriving over the weekend would relocate temporarily in the coming days to apartments in Worcester, where the city anticipated taking in about 200 evacuees, according to Mayor Joseph Petty.

Petty said city officials have been preparing to address the needs of evacuees during weekly meetings with organizations like the United Way of Central Massachusetts, local businesses, and representatives with the offices of officials like state Senator Harriette Chandler, US Representative James McGovern, and US Senator Edward Markey.

The city’s school department will play a key role in assisting evacuees by working with children and their families, Petty said. Worcester officials are also working with local landlords to find apartments that can serve as new homes for the city’s new residents.

“Worcester has a history of over 100 years of taking refugees... it makes us a welcoming community here,” Petty said. “It pays dividends in the long run by accepting people here, and making them feel wanted and part of the culture.”

Globe correspondent Charlie McKenna contributed to this report.

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