

Interfaith Coalition in Connecticut Welcomes Evacuated Afghan Families

A small community coalition of volunteers in Fairfield County, CT recently welcomed two Afghan families committing to helping them get settled in the US.

FAIRFIELD, CT, USA, November 22, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The Interfaith Refugee Resettlement Committee ([IRRC](#)), a small community coalition of volunteers in Fairfield County, Connecticut, recently welcomed two Afghan families into fully furnished homes. The families include 11 individuals ranging in age from one year old to 68 years old, and the IRRC is committed to helping each of them get settled and acclimated to life in the United States. And these families are just two of many more who will need help.

Since August, more than 60,000 Afghan refugees have been living in limbo on military bases and in hotels across the United States, waiting for their permanent placements in various communities across the United States. Additionally, another 40,000 refugees are still waiting outside the country.

Now, after months of uncertainty, movement is finally starting to happen, in large part because of organizations like the IRRC. But there's still a lot of work to do.

While the US Department of State provides assistance to refugees through its Reception and Placement program, that support only lasts three months. So the IRRC's efforts, in partnership with and under the oversight of [IRIS](#) — Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services, based in New Haven, CT, are a prime example of what is likely to become the "new era of resettlement" in the United States, as the White House recently permitted private citizens to sponsor Afghan refugees.

"Of the 100,000 Afghans waiting to be resettled, we expect that the traditional refugee resettlement system in the U.S. can only handle about half of that," says John McGeehan, who serves as volunteer director of the IRRC's steering committee. "The rest will need community support."

Fortunately, this isn't the first time the IRRC has resettled a refugee family. Five years ago, many of the same coalition members helped a Syrian family, who themselves are now an integral part of the current coalition. Because of that experience, the IRRC can serve as a model for other groups that want to help with community co-sponsorship.

"When my family and I arrived in the United States from Syria five years ago," says Imam Mohammed Almasri, a leader at the Al Madany Center, "we came with nothing and we didn't know what to expect. IRRC volunteers welcomed us, and helped us understand what we needed to do to build a life here. They supported us as we took each step forward. The Koran teaches us to welcome the poor and the oppressed, those who leave everything behind for a new life and justice. There's an important verse about a time when some people who were poor and oppressed migrated from Mecca to Medina with nothing, and the people of Medina welcomed them with open arms. That was our own situation coming here. Now it is our privilege to help families from Afghanistan make a home here, too. As we often say, we still have much to do but we can do it — the sky's the limit!"

The IRRC is a local interfaith community coalition in Fairfield County, Connecticut, comprised of volunteer members from First Church Congregational of Fairfield; Al Madany Center; St Lukes; Christ & Holy Trinity; Temple Israel; the Conservative Syngagogue; and the local Muslim community, as well as additional unaffiliated volunteers. Together, these members will work to help create a runway toward self-sufficiency for the two Afghan families, and hopefully more families in the future.

"The IRRC is a tremendous example of what religious individuals and institutions can do together," says Rabbi Michael Friedman of Temple Israel in Westport, Conn.

"I am extraordinarily proud of our congregation for committing to this effort and of the many volunteers who are committing their time and expertise to welcome these Afghan refugee families. This effort merges our deeply-cherished Jewish values with our families' lived historical experience. The Torah calls upon us countless times to welcome the stranger, because we once knew oppression in the land of Egypt. Moreover, so many of us treasure our own family stories of a relative arriving in the United States with little to their name, often seeking shelter from persecution, committed to pursuing all the opportunities this nation had to offer. Now is our chance to help another family follow the same arc."

Already, the IRRC has secured housing for two Afghan families, signing the initial lease on their behalf and committing to helping cover rent for the first year. The IRRC has also furnished both homes with local donations and continues a general support campaign. In addition, it has committed to providing food, clothing and basic necessities for the families as well as helping with their initial transportation, education, healthcare, employment, social acclimation, and more. The houses are near each other, within walking distance to public transportation and grocery stores. They are also near public schools that offer programming before and after school, as well as English as a second language (ESOL).

"We know that the arrival of these families follows deep heartache and loss," says the Rev. Vanessa Rose, co-pastor of First Church.

"While recognizing that pain, we hope that the love we poured into their new homes will spark new hope for them. In the midst of recent social division and isolation, the IRRC's shared values of hospitality and our common belief that God calls us to welcome refugees and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves has created new friendships in service. First Church calls itself

the church that says 'yes.' In our partner congregations, we have found that same willingness to be open hearted, and eager to respond to need by saying 'yes'" Our welcome not only serves these families, but strengthens our entire community. We are so proud to have these smart, resilient, committed, caring families as our new neighbors and friends."

Community co-sponsorship is a collaborative effort between a specialized nonprofit like IRIS, a group of local volunteers, and a refugee family. These groups, like the IRRC, will play an increasingly important role in helping Afghan refugees become self-sufficient and get off to a strong start.

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