

Nashville's Jewish Community to Help Provide Aid to Afghan Allies

by Barbara Dab

The United States is currently seeing tens of thousands of Afghans pour into the country as Humanitarian Parolees. After spending weeks or months on military bases while awaiting processing, they are now in need of assistance, and Nashville's Jewish community is coordinating efforts to do just that. Through the combined efforts of the organized Jewish community and the Nashville International Center for Empowerment (NICE), funds are being raised to help resettle Afghan people in Nashville and to help them become acculturated in the United States. Eric Stillman, CEO of The Jewish Federation and Jewish Foundation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee says, "The Jewish Federation and Jewish Foundation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee is proud to partner with our congregations, agencies, and Jewish community organizations to participate in helping to resettle about 300 Afghan allies coming to Nashville from the approximately 50,000 Afghans allies who are coming to the US. Our Federation together with Jewish Family Service is leading a Jewish community volunteer effort to maximize our efficiency." According to Pam Kelner, Executive Director of Jewish Family Service of Middle Tennessee, there is greater strength in a collective effort rather than individual organizations working alone. "This is a coordinated Jewish community response, and we are working with an established resettlement agency to make a bigger impact." Kelner also says, "Many of the newly arrived Afghans assisted the United States government for a long time, and it is important to recognize their status as our allies, rather than refugees."

According to a recent update by NICE, Nashville will be receiving over 100 Afghan allies by year's end. The goal, says Michal Becker, Engagement Director for the Jewish Federation, is to help everyone become comfortable in their new homes and new lives. Volunteers are needed to provide not just financial support, but also to help with basic day to day life skills. Things like learning about the monetary system, driving, language, and navigating the diverse cultural landscape of Nashville. And Becker says those wanting to help need to manage expectations and be sensitive, "It is important for us to be welcoming, but also to recognize the tremendous trauma people are going through. Not all of them will be happy to be here." Through four training sessions NICE will help volunteers learn ways to engage appropriately and to spot any issues that might need additional support. Becker also says the process will not be a quick one, "This will take a long-term commitment. Volunteers should be prepared to be involved for quite a while."

The road to arriving in Nashville is not an easy one, and there is urgency as the holidays approach. The Shapiro Foundation is a Boston based organization that has been working in the resettlement arena for the past five years. According to Larry Tobin, the organization's Director, there are approximately 40,000 waiting on United States military bases to be resettled. Behind them are another 10,000 waiting on US bases overseas and about 1,000 on bases run by other countries. He says assistance by organizations like NICE and The Jewish Federation is critical to moving the resettlement process along. "The government goes very slowly. At the rate they move, it could take until Spring before everyone can get resettled. But the military wants everyone off their bases by the holidays, so we all need to step up and help." The Shapiro Foundation is doing its part by matching, dollar for dollar, donations over an amount needed to support a family for six months. Nashville's Jewish community has already raised enough for two families, meaning thanks to the matching grant, even more families will be receiving financial support. "We believe in the Jewish value of repairing the world. We work through Jewish Federations of North America to help any community that wants to welcome Afghans by assisting with co-sponsorships," he says. To date, The Shapiro Foundation has helped 25 communities across the country with matching grants. "These community-based sponsorships have resulted in two dozen resettlements so far."

Nashville's Jewish community is stepping up. According to Michal Becker, there are currently 45 volunteers waiting to welcome Afghan families. And JFS's Pam Kelner says she is not surprised by the outpouring of support. "This notion of welcoming the stranger resonates with our community regardless of political persuasion or personal ideology. Everyone can be engaged around this." The Jewish Federation's Eric Stillman agrees and says helping immigrants is also part of the American heritage, "As Americans, many of our parents, grandparents, or even great-grandparents came to this country in need of just this sort of assistance, and we want to help our allies now that we have an opportunity to do so."

To learn more about this effort, or to volunteer, contact Michal Becker at michal@jewishnashville.org. The volunteer training with NICE will begin December 5th. All volunteers must participate in the training.



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