

# WORLD

## Helping hands welcome in Afghan resettlement

The U.S. State Department coordinates a private sponsorship program for Afghan evacuees

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On Monday, the State Department announced a new plan for resettling Afghan evacuees: Americans can now sponsor evacuees privately, writing their own plans to help with housing and other basic needs.

Nearly two months after the end of a troubled U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, about 53,000 Afghan evacuees are still living on military installations in the United States, waiting to be settled in permanent housing. The United States hopes to resettle about 95,000 Afghans total, including thousands living on U.S. bases overseas, but had only resettled about 6,700 as of Monday. As the State Department finishes its paperwork, resettlement agencies have scrambled to find and furnish apartments to house those who fled Taliban rule.

Previously, Americans eager to help out donated or volunteered with resettlement agencies that already worked with the government. But many of those agencies had closed offices and cut down staff after the Trump administration shrank the U.S. refugee program. Now they're struggling to readjust to a new spike in demand, especially amid a tight housing market that makes finding affordable apartments difficult.

The private sponsorships the State Department is endorsing could help close the gap. Usually, the government gives resettlement agencies \$2,275 per refugee to cover the first 90 days of expenses, and agencies fundraise to pay for additional English classes, job training, and other help. Under the new Sponsor Circle Program, groups of at least five adults must raise the \$2,275 per refugee, pass background checks, complete training on how to welcome evacuees, and create a plan to help the Afghans get settled. Resettlement agencies often focus their efforts in cities, but private sponsors may live in areas with cheaper housing and be able to settle evacuees there.

The United States previously allowed private sponsorships under former President Ronald Reagan, but that program expired during the Clinton administration. The current initiative is targeted to Afghan evacuees but could expand. President Joe Biden in February signed an executive order that called for the United States to add private sponsorships to its refugee resettlement programs. Canada already has a long-running private sponsorship program that other countries have imitated.

It's not yet clear how many sponsors will join the program. David Bier, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, predicted participation would get a boost if the government allowed sponsors to pick the specific evacuees they work with. Choosing evacuees would allow veterans to sponsor Afghans they worked with during deployments and would allow Afghans already in the United States to sponsor relatives or friends. Once the sponsorship program expands beyond Afghan evacuees to all refugees, Bier said that adding the private sponsorships to the government's refugee cap—set at 125,000 this year—could boost participation, since sponsors would know they were helping more refugees enter the United States rather than simply bankrolling what the government already intended to do. But last fiscal year the United States only admitted 11,445 refugees, well below the previous 62,500 cap, so private sponsorships may boost refugee resettlements even if they're counted toward the cap.

The State Department's Monday announcement didn't specify whether this first stage of the sponsorship program would include either of those details. (On Thursday, the department declined to clarify the question.) Bier predicted those details will be the difference between hundreds or thousands of volunteers.

“You're not doing [sponsorship] on behalf of someone you know, and you're not increasing the cap, you're just subsidizing the government's commitment?” Bier said. “Without those two pieces, then it's not going to work.”