

## Refugees settle into new lives in region

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All of Northwest Arkansas's refugees are officially settled following the months of cultural and English classes, job placement help and other direct assistance that greet every refugee arrival across the country.

The nonprofit Canopy Northwest Arkansas and other resettlement organizations help refugees begin new lives with an apartment stocked by volunteers and rides to job interviews and school appointments for the first 90 days after arrival. Canopy resettlement director Emily Linn last month said no new refugees have arrived since late July, so all 55 who came since Canopy started a year ago are past the intensive and often stressful welcoming process.

Majidi Shabani, who fled his southern African home after militiamen killed his father and scattered his family around 17 years ago, left his refugee camp for Northwest Arkansas in December with his wife and two children too young for school. It was their first winter. He recalled his most fraught experience so far was learning to use the transit bus system with the whole family. They were waiting at a bus stop in cold they had never experienced with several Canopy volunteers, all while English was still new.

But he laughed about it earlier this month and said the good has far outweighed the bad. He works as a cashier and joined Canopy's board, and he and his wife are trying to grow a small business selling Kenyan-made shoes. His oldest child will enter school next year. The family's preparing to apply for permanent residency, also called their green cards, next month as federal law requires. And they recently took a roadtrip, that most American of customs, to Colorado for their first time outside Arkansas.

"I enjoyed driving and seeing how the country is," Shabani said, adding the family spent Thanksgiving with friends. "I thank the people who helped us to be here."

### **JOINING NORTHWEST ARKANSAS**

Shabani and the 54 other arrivals tie Northwest Arkansas to some of the world's largest and longest-running conflicts. More than 22 million people worldwide have fled their home countries because of mortal danger for their religious, ethnic or political group, according to the United Nations refugee agency.

Those admitted to the United States had to repeatedly prove the danger of their situations to U.N. and U.S. personnel and pass health and security checks by the Department of Homeland Security and several other agencies. President Donald Trump's administration last month tightened those checks further, citing a risk of terrorism by those admitted. No terrorist attack had been carried out by someone let in under the earlier vetting system, which can take years to complete, according to the libertarian Cato Institute.

Each family adjusts and becomes fluent in English at its own pace, Linn said, but all are doing well so far. Many have signed up for Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps, for at least some of their time here. A couple are taking GED classes and some have already been promoted at work, she said. Most live in or around Fayetteville. "I feel like our community is doing such a great job with the families we've received so far. They're just thriving, they really are," Linn said. "It's hard for people to meet other people in the community and feel like they belong, but I think that's something that we've done really well." Canopy keeps in contact with landlords, police and public schools, helping them and new arrivals learn about each other. Sgt. Anthony Murphy with Fayetteville Police said he wasn't aware of any issues that had come up and the department would be happy to help refugees learn about who the police are and what they do.

About a dozen children from refugee families have enrolled in Fayetteville Public Schools, said Megan Godfrey, co-director of the district's English as a Second Language program. Any students who lag in English-speaking skills have a dedicated part of the day for the language and in some cases have an instructor with them during their regular classes.

The program has expanded to include junior high and high school students for the first time to accommodate the refugees, Godfrey said, but she added the district probably would need to make the change regardless. Canopy provides translators for some languages as well.

"I've been really impressed by our schools' willingness to be welcoming and just embrace new cultures and new families," Godfrey said, adding the newcomers enrich the district. "We're so grateful to be able to learn from them and learn with them."

Sai Min, a former refugee who works as a manager at George's Chicken, was joined by his wife and daughter from Myanmar, also called Burma, in February through Canopy's program. His daughter is now in grade school. It was hard for her at first to adjust to new people and new teachers in a new world, hard enough to push her to tears, Min said. The support and extra instruction from her teachers has helped turn that around, and now math is her favorite subject. "So far they like it," Min said of his family.

Some federal services for refugees continue after the first 90 days, such as programs that help them start businesses or farms.

## **SLOWING TO A TRICKLE**

Refugee admissions in October slowed to a pace of about 1,200 for the month, one-eighth the number in October 2016. Linn and others have pointed to the Trump administration's new rules

and other changes as the reason. Refugee applicants must provide information on each place they've lived for the past 10 years instead of the past five, for example, National Public Radio and other outlets reported. Family reunification programs that allowed Min to reunite with his wife and child, for example, have also been suspended.

The total number of admissions allowed this fiscal year was reduced to 45,000, about 9,000 lower than last year and the lowest total since 2006, according to the U.S. State Department. The pace set in October, the first month of the fiscal year, would be enough to reach about 15,000 for the year if it continues.

“The security of the American people is this administration’s highest priority, and these improved vetting measures are essential for American security,” acting Homeland Security Secretary Elaine Duke told The Associated Press in October. “These new, standardized screening measures provide an opportunity for the United States to welcome those in need into our country, while ensuring a safer, more secure homeland.”

Third District Rep. Steve Womack, R-Rogers, whose district includes Canopy’s service area, wrote a letter with two other Arkansas members of Congress last year to the State Department opposing the settlement of refugees here. They pointed to comments from the former Federal Bureau of Investigation director, James Comey, who said it’s impossible to eliminate all security risk from refugee admissions. They also called for improvement to the system.

A spokeswoman for Womack in late November said he was unavailable to comment on the recent changes because of a busy schedule. Spokesmen for Arkansas’ U.S. Reps. Rick Crawford, 1st District, and Bruce Westerman, 4th District, didn’t return phone and email requests for comment in the past two weeks.

Linn said she feels a kind of hopelessness she can’t do anything to restore the flow of refugees at a time when conflicts in Syria, Myanmar and elsewhere create more of them seemingly without end. Canopy has set a goal to resettle 75 refugees next year. In the meantime, Linn and other members are looking for ways to keep supporting refugees and other immigrants to the area, perhaps expanding the group’s job placement services.

Linn said money from the U.S. State Department’s Refugee Division provides about one-third of the group’s income, with the rest coming from local donations. Canopy doesn’t publicize its operating budget, but the group’s 2016 filing with the Internal Revenue Service shows it received about \$107,000 in grants and contributions and spent \$41,000 of it that year. Most of the refugees it has worked with arrived this year, so those numbers for 2017 would likely be different.

“We want to be faithful, to pour that compassion into wherever our community sees a need,” Linn said.