

## Balancing Safety, Resettlement As Afghan Refugees Arrive in Oklahoma

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Afghan refugees touching down at Will Rogers and Tulsa International airports are arriving scarred. Scarred by death threats from the Taliban, by air raids from Afghan, U.S. and Coalition forces and by car bombings orchestrated by the Islamic State and other militant factions.

They arrive here from one of eight military bases at the pace of one or two a day seeking shelter and a sense of belonging in communities with mixed feelings about their presence. A network of Oklahoma non-profit organizations, religious groups and local law enforcement is working to provide for their safe resettlement.

“The trauma that they’ve experienced has been significant,” said Jessi Riesenber, programs director at Catholic Charities Archdiocese Oklahoma City, which is leading the state’s refugee resettlement efforts. “So, we’re just really trying to mitigate any triggers in their trauma, either by them having to relive certain stories too much, or their transition being too rocky.”

Some 64,000 Afghans — many of whom worked to establish a foothold for democracy in their country — are coming to the U.S. in the largest war refugee resettlement effort since the 1970s. About 350 have arrived in Oklahoma since August. Eventually, 1,800 will settle in communities around Oklahoma City, Tulsa and Stillwater. They face the prospect of rebuilding their lives in a state where **4 in 10,000 people speak a Persian language.**

Gov. Kevin Stitt joined an early chorus of state and national leaders welcoming the refugees in the days following the fall of Kabul. Yet, mutual safety concerns persist.

Some state GOP leaders have been vocal in their criticism of resettling Afghans in Oklahoma and the process for vetting them. Local Muslim leaders fear that those public comments create a greater need for security for themselves and arriving refugees.

Though she said there is no reason to expect a threat of violence against the refugees, Riesenberg said Catholic Charities is aware “there could always be that possibility.” The focus is on protecting the refugees from being approached by people who don’t understand them and their customs, she said.

An FBI liaison is present at meetings held by organizations working on refugee resettlement. The liaison’s role is to give safety tips, suggestions and monitor things like online hate towards Muslims and Afghans in Oklahoma, Riesenberg said.

Just this week, the executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Adam Soltani, shared a post on **Facebook** about a Sikh woman who arrived at his office with bruises and a busted lip. She had just been beaten after being confused for being Muslim, Soltani said.

Undisclosed hotels around the larger metros are serving as temporary transitional housing for the Afghan refugees, while Catholic Charities and the Council on Islamic-American Relations work to secure them permanent housing in areas of the city conducive to where they work and take their children to school.

This can prove to be difficult in a state where apartment availability has decreased by 32.5% in the past year, while rent has increased by 4.2%.

“We already are facing an affordable housing shortage in Oklahoma City and Tulsa,” said Veronica Laizure, civil rights director for the Oklahoma Council on Islamic-American Relations. “So, we’re trying to find locations that will take reduced rent, or that will help us set up some subsidized programs for these folks.

One of those locations is in Stillwater, where 40 refugee families are expected to resettle in the coming months with the help of Oklahoma State University and private landlords, according to the **Tulsa World**.

### The Resettlement Investment

Riesenberg said the investment in resettling Afghan refugees across Oklahoma is a projected \$4.8 million — including about \$900,000 for housing. Other large expenses include congregate dining (\$2 million), with Catholic Charities works to provide religious and culturally appropriate meals to the families staying in hotel rooms with no kitchens, and local identification (\$360,000), which includes legal status applications and other adjustments.

Refugees receive cash assistance from the federal government dispersed monthly through Catholic Charities. An individual gets \$190 a month, a family of two gets \$238, while a family of

three gets \$308. The amounts given are meant to incentivize employment and self-sufficiency, Riesenberg said, but family sizes can range from one to 11 people, meaning the federal dollars hardly cover their expenses for the eight months they receive the money. Catholic Charities, with the help of other local organizations, donors and volunteers, will make up the difference, she said.

Oklahomans can **donate** food, clothes, diapers, hygiene and kitchen essentials, school supplies and basic home furnishings, many of which are organized and sorted by volunteers at the Council on Islamic-American Relations offices on United Founders Boulevard in Oklahoma City.

Rhonda Lyon and Jenny Jacobsen of Midwest City, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, volunteered to help sort through the donations one day last month. Lyon said she became concerned about the refugee's welfare when she learned they were coming to Oklahoma.

"They have got to be in a terrible place, you know, in their heads," she said. "They were pulled out of their homes, their country, and their comfort zones."

Not everyone she knows feels that way, Lyon said.

"We believe they need help and support, right?" she said, nodding to Jacobsen from across a room filled with hundreds of unsorted bins, boxes and suitcases of clothing. Other people want them to go back where they came from, but the whole problem is that it wasn't a good place to raise their families. They're coming here for survival."

### The Vetting Process

On Sept. 4, Oklahoma Republican Party Chairman John Bennett encouraged Oklahomans to express their disapproval of Muslim refugees arriving in the state.

"I encourage you to call and email the governor, call and email your legislators, and tell them 'do not allow Afghan refugees into Oklahoma,'" Bennett said in a video posted to the Oklahoma GOP Facebook page.

In the video, Bennett also casts doubt on the federal government's refugee vetting process, blaming President Joe Biden for resettling "unvetted, primarily military-aged males in the United States, and in Oklahoma."

“I was on the ground in Afghanistan and there is no way we can properly vet these people. If the government says otherwise, they are lying to you,” he said.

Jackson Lahmeyer, a Republican from Owasso vying for U.S. Senator James Lankford’s seat in 2022, also doubts the refugee vetting process.

“The Afghan Refugees are beginning to commit serious crimes,” Lahmeyer wrote in a Sept. 24 Facebook post, even though there haven’t been any reports of Afghans committing crimes in Oklahoma. “We cannot bring unvetted military-aged Afghan men into our country.”

In a **letter** to all 50 governors, former members of The Department of Homeland Security reassured governors of the rigorous vetting process.

“Before any evacuee from Afghanistan is permitted to enter the U.S., they are required to undergo multiple layers of vetting and screening including biographical and biometric checks,” reads the letter. “Any flags result in further vetting and investigations until the flags are resolved or (there is) a denial of entrance into the country.”

Those assigned humanitarian parole — a temporary legal status to be adjusted within a year — are sent to a third country first, where they are vetted and then sent to a U.S. military base “safe haven.”

Within these bustling city-like refugee camps there are reports of Afghan refugees being charged with robbery, theft, sex acts with a minor, and spousal abuse. However, Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck, chief of U.S. Northern Command, said crime rates in the camps of over 12,000 people are “on par and in most cases significantly lower” than similarly sized U.S. populations.

A recent **report** from the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, supports VanHerck’s claim. Alex Nowrasteh, the director of immigration studies at the Institute, writes that in 2017, Afghan immigrants in the U.S. aged 18-54 were 11.6 times less likely to commit a crime, get arrested and go to jail than native-born Americans in the same age group.

## The Role of Local Law Enforcement

To mitigate crime against or by refugees, the Oklahoma City Police Department is training officers and Afghans on how to interact with each other.

“We’re working on our end to try to find out more about the Afghan people, their customs, things like that,” said Master Sergeant Gary Knight, the department’s assistant public information officer.

“We’re also going to be doing training with some of the Afghans that come here to let them know what to expect. Here’s what our customs are, what our culture is like. Here’s how to properly interact with the police.”

Officers will receive the training in the form of a video, which will be sent out to everyone in the department and require them to take a test and sign off on the lessons upon completion, he said. Training for Afghans will be in-person and in partnership with Catholic Charities. When exactly the video and live training sessions will be implemented remains unclear.

One of the familiar ways of getting them acclimated will be allowing them to worship at one of 11 mosques in the Oklahoma City, Tulsa and Stillwater areas, accompanied by a background-checked Catholic Charities volunteer trained in cultural and trauma sensitivity.

Dr. Imad Enchassi, a local imam and theology professor at Oklahoma Christian University, was able to meet some of the arriving families at the airport as they touched down in Oklahoma City.

“They feel they do not have that huge Afghan family,” Enchassi said, explaining that while Oklahoma does have Afghans already living here, the local Muslim community is diverse, consisting of people in the Black community, refugees from Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and other Arab countries. “So, they want to move to another bigger city on the East Coast — West Coast — where there’s a concentration of Afghan families.”

Catholic Charities brought on at least seven volunteer translators since the Afghan refugees began arriving in the state, but only two have had the time to meet and help them. English classes are provided by both Catholic Charities and a long-term refugee resettlement organization called The Spero Project, so families can learn to communicate with people living here.

Enchassi said the language barrier has shed light on some previously overlooked complications. Among the first they encountered: Alarms going off in the dead of night, and phones all over the city buzzing, warning Oklahomans of tornadoes in the area last month.

When the Afghan refugees receive such alerts, Enchassi said, “normally they would go underground (because) there’s an airplane bombing.”