



COURTESY PHOTO

An Afghan family poses with volunteers from Resettling Afghan Families Together after having finished setting up their home with furniture and basic necessities.

## A life-saving RAFT

**Volunteers work around the clock to support Afghan refugees**

BY OLIVIA ANDERSON

In late July 2021, a friend strongly urged Arafat Safi to flee his home in Afghanistan. Rumblings of a Taliban takeover had been pulsing through communities and Safi's job as a senior advisor to the minister of foreign affairs made him particularly vulnerable, his friend cautioned.

Safi had heard the rumblings, as well as rumors that there would not be a forceful military occupation but instead a political settlement or shared government agreement.

He initially brushed off this advice, but it quickly became apparent that he would need to uproot his family and

depart the country as soon as possible.

"I was telling myself that I hadn't done anything to them or anything to my own country that I should be held accountable to in the wrong way, so I did not leave my place. But the next day, when the Taliban started headhunting and looking for people I got frightened, for my family, for my mother," Safi said. "Everyone working with the government was their enemy, particularly those very close to the U.S. and particularly those working with the security sector. And I qualified in both areas."

When the Taliban captured Kabul, the nation's capital, on Aug. 15, Safi became one of many Afghans flooding the airport to escape. He had sent his wife and four children

to India a week prior to the government's collapse, but his own flight was scheduled for the day the takeover took place. The airport was a maelstrom of loud blasts occurring directly outside and, according to Safi, people tying themselves to planes in desperation and falling when they took off.

Trapped in Kabul for a period of time, Safi eventually managed to obtain a visa for Pakistan, where he fled and stayed for several weeks.

He then flew to Turkey and sent his family's passports to India, so they could join him in Istanbul. From there, Safi and his family boarded a plane to the United States in hopes of finding refuge and an opportunity to plant new roots.

SEE RAFT

## RAFT

FROM | 1

“The journey before entering the United States was horrible. It was frightening. I felt like I could be lost at any of these points – in Pakistan, in Turkey, before getting my family together,” Safi said.

Today, Safi and his family live in the West End of Alexandria, in the Landmark area. They are one of the many families that Resettling Afghan Families Together, a local organization dedicated to supporting refugees, helped house in Northern Virginia.

“There’s a lot of trauma,” Natalie Perdue, an organizer with NoVA RAFT, said. “These are stories that keep you up at night. The trauma is intense.”

This fact, coupled with the rapid influx of Afghan refugees that arrived in the area last year, spurred the conception of the grassroots coalition. Perdue and co-organizer Dan Altman watched the evacuation numbers continue to swell and the global crisis continue to worsen. They recognized that the many incoming refugees would need assistance and committed to helping with fundamental needs such as housing, furniture, clothes and school registration.

Perdue and Altman each notified their networks and

called a meeting that yielded an attendance of 59 neighbors who initially aimed to help 10 families find housing. As of Jan. 10, RAFT has helped nearly 90 families, partnered with more than 20 community groups and donated more than 800 pieces of furniture to refugee homes.

Many volunteers come from Christian and Jewish backgrounds and have cited their abiding faith as a motivating factor to help. Some contributing organizations include Temple B’nai Shalom, Congregation Olam Tikvah and Burke Community Church.

“It just kind of kept happening,” Perdue said. “It’s absolute madness; we’re just working on the backs of volunteers.”

NoVA RAFT’s work starts with refugee agencies providing names and phone numbers. RAFT volunteers then contact evacuees and conduct an intake process to figure out the furniture, supplies and number of beds each household needs.

Resettlement efforts consist of sending out calls for furniture donations, picking them up using one of three 53-foot trailers, donated by a local moving company, and determining which items go to which family’s home.



PHOTO/NATALIE PERDUE

RAFT volunteers unload furniture while setting up a refugee family’s home.

Volunteers constantly check in with resettled families to learn their most current needs, from mattresses to furniture to kitchen appliances. They also set up refugees’ new homes and follow up with guidance on obtaining drivers’ licenses, submitting job applications, setting up bank accounts, finding medical assistance and registering for English classes.

With 150 volunteers currently working with NoVA RAFT, the organization has exceeded any initial expectations. Perdue attributes some of this success to the fact that this particular crisis reaches across all religious and political bounds.

“You’ve got your left wing and your right wing working together – those who really believe in refugee assistance,” Perdue said. “We’ve been able to reach across both lines and no one cares about politics; we just want to help these new neighbors.”

Many volunteers felt called to donate their time for deeply personal reasons. Perdue said that several volunteers were previously stationed in Afghanistan while in the military. Some of the

Afghan refugees now entering Northern Virginia were translators that worked with the U.S. military, so there is a desire for many to give back, she said.

Others come from immigrant backgrounds themselves. Alexandria resident and RAFT volunteer Nesli Kasap is a first generation Turkish American whose parents immigrated from Turkey to the U.S. in the 1990s.

Upon hearing that many Afghan refugees were being resettled into the area, Kasap logged onto Facebook to see how she could help those whose position she was once in. A friend had posted a list of resources, one of which was RAFT, and Kasap signed up immediately.

“It’s a full circle moment,” Kasap said. “When we arrived we basically had nothing, slept four people to a mattress on the floor and could have definitely used a resource like this back in the day to help us get on our feet.”

Another resident, Julie Mueller, learned of RAFT when Altman spoke at her place of worship to recruit volunteers. A Hungarian im-

migrant herself whose family came to the United States in 1956, Mueller, who recently retired, felt compelled to help. She signed up, and late one evening someone posted they needed a ride early the next morning to transport a young woman to her school testing placement appointment.

Mueller agreed to the one ride, which turned into 40 to 60 hours a week of volunteer work. While her faith was not the main contributing factor to her volunteer efforts, Mueller said she’s impressed by the coalescence of various faith-based organizations to help this cause.

“People who are more religiously conservative to people who are more religiously liberal [are] all coming together and working together with a single goal in mind,” Mueller said. “... For as divisive as people say our country is, something like this really brings people together and makes you realize how much we all have in common, the things that are more alike than different.”

Yet even with the volunteer help, Perdue noted that the crisis is nowhere near over, as all temporary housing sites at military bases will be shut down come mid-February.

As of December 2021, almost 3,000 Afghans have been resettled in Virginia, and more than 5,000 evacuees are still living on military bases in Virginia, according to the Department of Homeland Security. With 2.6 million registered refugees, Afghans make up one of the largest refugee populations in the world.

Lutheran Integration and Refugee Services, one of the four refugee agencies in Northern Virginia, anticipates processing 50 refugee families a week for the next eight weeks because of the impending shut down.

## RAFT

FROM | 4

This month, NoVA RAFT has had to scale back the amount of follow-up services offered due to the sheer number of refugees coming in.

“The volume that we’re dealing with right now and for the next two months is overwhelming,” Perdue said. “... The goal is to quickly get these families stabilized and get them jobs so that they’re self-sufficient. That’s what they all want, but the clock is ticking.”

The uphill climb isn’t over for Safi yet, either. He landed on U.S. soil with just \$7,000 in hand and was initially denied humanitarian parole, an emergency designation that grants the right to live and work in the U.S. for two years.

While sorting this out, Safi and his family were relegated to what’s known as a “family room,” a small, cold room in the Dulles airport bedecked with cameras and lacking a

bathroom door. No one was allowed to bring their jackets, shoes or socks. Safi said the room resembled a prison.

Now that he’s in Alexandria, Safi faces the obstacle of attaining financial and job security. And Northern Virginia isn’t quite as walkable as Kabul, Safi said, so he will also be looking for a car in the coming months. He applied for employment authorization and expects a biometric interview at the end of the month.

“Every month I ask for the rent I feel like I’m taking someone else’s share because I know there are a lot of other families who might need that. I feel like, ‘If I could start working, this could go somewhere else as well,’” Safi said. “These are the small things, but the major worries I had was for my life, my kids’ life, [and that’s] taken care of.”

In Alexandria, immigrants make up 28% of the total population, and the city has



PHOTO/NATALIE PERDUE

Through the help of approximately 150 volunteers, more than 800 pieces of furniture have been distributed to refugee households in the area.

committed to providing a range of services to refugees and asylum seekers, such as rental assistance, utility assistance, food and clothing assistance, homeless services and temporary cash payments for families in need.

The city’s Workforce Development Center also provides services to refugees through career readiness workshops, individualized case manage-

ment, training and certification assistance and public hiring events in order to address employment needs.

“It’s heartwarming to see a family go from having nothing to having their basic needs met, but it’s also very heart-wrenching at the same time,” Mueller said. “[Many families] still have such a long way to go to acclimate - not those who speak and read English fluently, but those

who have to learn an entirely new alphabet and an entirely new language and an entirely new culture. It’s such a long journey.”

Though he’s still finding his financial footing and processing the heavy psychological toll of losing his home, Safi expressed unwavering gratitude for the fresh start. He recalled that a volunteer at NoVA RAFT recently connected him with a friend whose family took his children out ice skating. Afterward, Safi’s family had them over for dinner.

“When one loses his or her country, they feel they have lost everything,” Safi said. “The socialization helps us more in terms of getting over our thoughts about Afghanistan. We feel like we have new families here and new friends here.”

For more information about RAFT, visit <https://no-varaft.org>.

-oanderson@alextimes.com