

## From machine gun belts to bed bug welts



### Afghan refugees fleeing the Taliban deal with rodent, insect infestations in Alexandria apartments

BY LEXIE JORDAN AND WAFIR SALIH

In August 2021, when the Taliban gained full control of Kabul, thousands of Afghans found themselves fleeing with hopes for better lives in the United States. Around 1,000 of those Afghan refugees resettled in Alexandria.

Little did these Afghans expect, upon their arrival in Alexandria, to be fleeing

from rodents and bed bugs in the apartments that were supposed to be their refuge.

All of the apartments in question are managed by Morgan Properties, which runs five apartment complexes in Alexandria: Bennington Crossings, Brookdale, Lynbrook, Stoneridge and Willow Run.

Arafat Safi, who resided at Willow Run for 18 months, said the infestation in his family's apartment was severe.

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“If they weren't Afghan refugees, would this be happening to them?”

—a local pastor



An entryway into Lynbrook Apartments.

PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH



PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

Lynbrook is one of five apartment complexes managed by Morgan Properties in Alexandria.

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“On average, we were catching like eight and nine or sometimes 10 rats [per month],” Safi said.

A local pastor – who requested anonymity due to his church working directly with Morgan Properties-owned apartments – said he’s familiar with an instance of a child being bitten by a rat.

“When my alarm bells went off was when someone said, ‘The rat bit the child in the middle of the night,’” the pastor said.

Vice Mayor Amy Jackson expressed concern over the conditions at these apartment complexes.

“Health and safety are the city’s top concern and no human being should live in filth and squalor all the while paying exorbitant rents,” Jackson said in an email to the Times. “We will continue to work closely with property management and address inhumane issues in this community.”

For this story, the Times spoke with three Afghan refugees, three community members who volunteer time

helping the Afghan families, the head of Lutheran Social Services in Northern Virginia, two members of Alexandria’s City Council and a city code enforcement official. We also reached out twice to three different people in property management at Morgan Properties, but received no response.

**The escape**

In Afghanistan, Safi worked directly for the country’s national security advisor in the pro-U.S. government that gave way to Taliban control upon the withdrawal of American troops – which made Safi a target.

“[The Taliban] somehow knew me and also my boss, the national security advisor of Afghanistan. He had signed the BSA, the bilateral security agreement with the States, so he was a prime target, and anyone close to him was a prime target,” Safi said.

Safi said on several occasions he was traveling with his boss when their convoy was attacked.

“I would usually travel with him to his meetings, to all his travels outside Afghanistan. But we were lucky that we did

not get hurt,” Safi said. “And the day [the Taliban] took over, I had to leave my house. I had to be in hiding for a month.”

Safi and his family were able to escape Afghanistan during the U.S. evacuation, as did the other families interviewed for this article.

Daniel Altman, an organizer with Resettling Afghan Families Together, or NoVA RAFT, said the United States has a debt to these refugees who risked their lives aiding the U.S. in Afghanistan.

“I think it’s important to remember that many of these families are the very people who served the U.S. government in Afghanistan. And they’ve been brought here. The United States [needs] to help create for them a safe and dignified future,” Altman said.

**The resettlement**

With the United States being an ally to Afghanistan, many refugees entered the country via the nation’s capital. Lutheran Social Services National Capital Area was swamped with refugees and

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PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

The Resident Services office at Lynbrook, managed by Morgan Properties.



PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

A Morgan Properties sign on a building at Willow Run in Alexandria.

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were tasked with the near impossible job of finding affordable and dignified housing in the area on a budget.

“We went from serving about 500 people a year to 500 people a month literally overnight,” Kristyn Peck, CEO of LSSNCA said.

LSSNCA is an esteemed re-

settlement agency that has worked with refugees for more than 100 years. It not only works with refugees through the resettlement process, it also assists them in the job process and acclimation to the United States. LSSNCA receives funding from both states and the federal government to provide help for the basic needs of new refugees.

The refugees were also serviced by NoVA RAFT, a community-based organization that works with the refugees. The organization delivers donated furniture and helps the newly relocated families move into their new apartments. It also helps acclimate the Afghans and their children through volunteer-run ESL classes and summer camps.

“Because we have been working in the community, we have a really good sense of the various challenges that families face, ranging from challenges in school, health challenges, employment challenges and, most recently, challenges with their living conditions,” Altman said.

As refugees kept flooding in, LSSNCA was working to put the Afghan refugees in an ideal area: one near public transportation, within a good school district and inexpensive, all while keeping Afghan community members somewhat together. It was difficult to say the least, especially when the refugees arrived with just the

clothes on their backs – and no prior credit record.

Apartments owned by Morgan Properties fit the bill. Per the website photos, the facilities are beautiful, clean apartments in a convenient location in Alexandria. These two- to three-bedroom apartments were running for roughly \$2,000 a month plus utilities.

Peck said LSSNCA financially assists families in the initial three months – via state funding – with rent costs. She said it tries to provide as much financial assistance as possible to the families when they first arrive, at least until families can provide for themselves.

“We provide financial assistance for rent through the funding from the state through the initial three months. If we have additional resources from the state, foundations or donors, then we help provide financial assistance for rent until our clients are able to do so themselves,” Peck said.

If these apartments seemed too good to be true it’s because they were.

### The conditions

Morgan Properties’ official website touts how it provides “superior housing and services to exceed every expectation,” in addition to exceptional and unparalleled customer service. The accounts from the many Afghan refugees living in their buildings paint a vastly different picture.

“There are mice and rats in almost every apartment. Some of the apartments have bugs, maybe bed bugs,” a volunteer working with NoVA RAFT said.

Yasmine, another Afghan refugee who is using only her first name in this story for safety reasons, moved into her apartment on Beauregard Street with her large extended family when she arrived in the United States.

“In this apartment there’s a large mess. ... There were always a lot of mice,” Yasmine said.

According to some residents, the problems were evident from move-in day, but the

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infestation grew to unbearable levels this past spring.

The local pastor said notices were posted alerting other tenants of the infestations in their neighbor's apartments. At first, the pastor said he was telling the refugees to contact management about the issues.

"We thought it was pretty run of the mill because you get mice sometimes," the local pastor said. ... "However the reports just kept coming in and in and in and it wasn't just these families – we started hearing the reports through RAFT. Other families, even in other apartment complexes, were experiencing this too."

Altman said it was when RAFT volunteers were tutoring families during the summer that they realized the extent of the problem.

"As we were spending more time with the families and with the kids we ... started to ask

questions. We learned that it was a fairly widespread problem," Altman said.

It was a game changer for the refugees' advocates when they realized many of these infestations were actually rats and not mice.

"What we actually found out was that the Dari word for mouse and rat is the same," the pastor said in reference to many of the Afghans' native language. "When they were saying, 'We have a mouse,' we were hearing, 'Oh, they just have a little field mouse,' but no, that was not the case. [In many instances] it was rats."

The rodents are also increasingly brazen.

"I saw a video this morning of a family after dinner, lights out, and they're sitting in a chair in their living room filming like what some six mice running around in the middle of the day," the pastor said.

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PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

Pathways between buildings at Lynbrook Apartments, managed by Morgan Properties.

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“The mice own that apartment. They don’t care about the people. It’s the mice house.”

The refugees and their advocates have gone public with their situation because the problem has not been solved

and living conditions in some instances are unbearable.

“Everyone has sought help,” the local pastor said. “Everyone has gone to the property manager. We wouldn’t have been in this position if the families hadn’t spoken up. I mean they are just beside themselves. Like,

they have little babies. I saw one video of a rat just crawling across the top of a crib.”

Islam Mowahidi, a 17-year-old refugee, said the response from Morgan Properties has been inadequate.

“We saw a lot of mice in the house and we reported it to the

leasing office and submitted it through the online account and they came to the apartment and did inspections,” Mowahidi said. “They came many times and brought traps and all that but that didn’t help us at all. And the mice just kept coming back more and more.”

### **Morgan Properties’ response**

Everyone the Times interviewed said Morgan Properties did respond to complaints about the infestations. But the refugees and their advocates, along with Alexandria City Councilor Alyia Gaskins and Vice Mayor Amy Jackson, all told the Times that this response has been inadequate.

“They say, ‘We’re coming. We’ll fix it.’ But they do not care. They do not fix it,” Yasmine said. “We knew another house who had the same thing too. This was not just a ‘My apartment’ problem.”

The pastor concurred Morgan Properties did respond to complaints about infestations.

“To their credit – I’m trying to be generous – Morgan Properties will send people in. It’s just not working. It’s like putting Band-Aids on it,” the pastor said.

Safi said he was met with a condescending attitude from his on-site property manager when he raised complaints about the infestation.

“Bedbugs, rats, and then the behavior or the attitude you get from the leasing office. They show you an attitude in a way that, because you do not have a credit, and the resettlement agency has given us a letter, somehow they are doing a pity on you and they have given you this apartment which you are not deserving,” Safi said. “You just have to accept that.”

Safi also said the remediation efforts by Morgan Properties were insufficient.

“Every time it was the stickers, the traps, but no solid solution for the problem,” Safi said.

Altman faulted Morgan Properties’ results but said they

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PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

More than 1,000 Afghan refugees have been settled in Alexandria during the past two years, many in apartments owned by Morgan Properties.

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did respond to complaints.

“It’s not necessarily a lack of effort on the part of the property management company because we do see them coming in and we see them trying to make those improvements,” Altman said. “[The remedies] don’t seem to work and the rodents come back and that does seem to be certain buildings and certain complexes ... have an even greater problem with it.”

Mowahidi said Morgan’s response at his Stoneridge apartment was lacking.

“The exterminators came two or three times. ... When they came, they would just do an inspection, but honestly nothing really to solve the problem,” Mowahidi said.

Councilor Alyia Gaskins said property managers need to work toward a solution that addresses the whole property.

“Property managers will come in. They’ll lay down traps. They’ll put in sticky tape, so forth, and they’ll call it case closed,” Gaskins said. “If your neighbor also has rodents, if your upstairs neighbors got rodents, downstairs neighbor – if it’s happening in multiple different apartments, then just putting traps in one is not enough to solve the issue. There’s like a whole building or a whole property approach that needs to be addressed.”

The pastor was more direct in his criticism of Morgan Properties’ response to the infestations.

“My impression of the situation is that they want to do the least amount they possibly can to fix the problem and spend the least amount possible,” the pastor said. “I’m coming at this from a moral position.... Someone needs to say to these folks, ‘You are not treating these humans like humans,’ and if that means closing an entire apartment complex to fix these apartments, then you do that.”

This is also not the first time

Morgan Properties has been accused of their apartments providing poor living conditions. An article on the Whitney, LLP – a consumer rights law firm – website reads in part:

“Baltimore news station WBAL featured two of Whitney, LLP’s clients, and attorney Daniel Whitney, Jr., on WBAL for recovering legal settlements for clients forced to live with bed bugs, mice and roaches. Both of our clients lived in apartment complexes owned and operated by Morgan Properties, the Columbia Pointe Apartments in Columbia, MD, and the Glen Ridge Apartments in Glen Burnie, MD.”

Morgan Properties buildings at Lynbrook and Brookdale in Alexandria also previously had numerous complaints against them about living conditions in the summer of 2021, per an article in Annandale Today.

Morgan Properties did not respond to six separate requests for comment from the Alexandria Times for this article. We initially emailed three people asking for interviews. When those requests went unanswered, we sent a second request asking for written responses to the four questions below, but received no response.

1. When were you first made aware of the rodent and bed bug infestations affecting the Afghan refugee residents?

2. What proactive measures have been taken by Morgan Properties to address these concerns?

3. What are your future plans to ensure such issues are prevented or promptly addressed?

4. A former resident mentioned how Willow Run charges utilities by billing an entire floor collectively. This means that if one resident conserves electricity and water while their neighbor uses them more extensively, both residents receive an equal charge. Can you provide clarity on



PHOTO/WAFIR SALIH

Willow Run Apartments, where Arafat Safi said his family’s apartment was infested with rodents the entire 18 months they spent there.

this billing approach and the rationale behind it?

### The city’s response

Part of the issue with ongoing infestations – like those at several of the Morgan Properties buildings – is the City of Alexandria only does inspections

once every four years unless it receives a complaint. City Code Administrator Gregg Fields said inspection of many Morgan Properties owned buildings was coming due this year.

“We go in and we do an inspection. If everything looks good they get a certificate

for four years where we don’t come back.” Fields said. “But if things are wrong, we’ll come back within 30 days depending on the situation. If there’s a real serious situation, then we’ll come back quickly. And

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COURTESY PHOTOS

**Left:** Bedbug welts on the legs of Afghan refugee children. **Above:** Screenshots of rodents cavorting in daylight – in front of people – from a video made by refugees.

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then they'll get those certificates," Fields said.

Alexandria's Afghan refugees have sought help from their friends at NoVa RAFT, the social workers at LSSNCA and

the management company, Morgan Properties, but nothing was stopping this ongoing unsanitary situation. In late April, a resident finally went to the City of Alexandria for help.

According to Fields, the city responded to this complaint

and baited the sewers near the buildings, and, per the records of that baiting, the city claims the infestation is going down, data that seems contradictory to what current and former Afghan residents of Morgan Properties facilities and their

advocates told us for this story.

On another occasion, a volunteer contacted the Alexandria Health Department after the child was bit by the rat and visited an urgent care center.

"One of our volunteers did contact the city health department, so I believe there should be a record of it ... I also believe there was one trip to urgent care about the rat bite and I believe urgent care said they were required to report that as well. That was earlier in the summer. I just know someone at the health department is aware. Who knows what they did with it. I have no idea," the pastor said.

An article from ALXnow in July 2021, a month before the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan that precipitated this wave of refugees, indicated the City of Alexandria became involved with Morgan Properties after receiving complaints from several tenants at Brookdale about "unsanitary conditions" such as "nests of rats, filthy water flowing into a bathtub, mold and holes in the wall."

Gaskins said one obstacle is housing insecurity, a lack of other options, for the families involved.

"I'll tell you, when I first found out about it, a situation at Morgan Properties, I went back to the city. I reported it right away. And then I had the family actually tell me, they're like, 'No, no, no, no. We do not want you to do that.' For some of those very concerned, they're like, 'We'd rather live here and be able to have a roof over our head than to be worried about not being here or to be homeless.'" Gaskins said.

### A path forward?

In a few instances, families in untenable living conditions have been moved to a different apartment. LSSNCA moved at least one family upon hearing complaints.

"If we are alerted to an issue, we work with the family and property management to

reconcile. If it is not addressed, we offer to move the program participant to another location," Peck said.

However, many other suffering refugees and other residents of these properties have not had that option.

"My question is, as soon as we get them out of there, who is going into that apartment? Even if it's not an Afghan family, it's someone else," the pastor said.

Many of the residents in these buildings have no other options but to live with the rodents.

"It's important to understand that a lot of these families don't have anywhere to go. Given their situation, they just recently arrived in the United States, a lot of them are unemployed. They don't have credit yet. They're not able to go anywhere. They are basically stuck there. That's all the more reason to really advocate for them," Altman said.

Altman said the optimal outcome is for Morgan Properties to take a comprehensive approach to eliminating the infestations.

"I think the best case scenario is that ... [Morgan Properties] be responsive and that they develop a comprehensive plan that does effectively eliminate the vermin from their apartments," Altman said. "And that everybody else who works with these families does everything possible to hold the property management companies accountable."

The pastor said it's past time for a resolution to the situation.

"This has gone on long enough. It's not just a cleaning one apartment issue. It's a human rights issue. It's a moral issue," the pastor said. "If they weren't Afghan refugees, would this be happening to them?"

Yasmine was at a loss to say anything good about her time so far in America.

"Nothing, because I lived there."