

HOME ON THE RANGE: PART 1



Re-settled Afghans make Kansas community home; local housing authority leader helps to remind us all of the transformative power of our shared American Dream

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This series reflects on the crucial work being done to help resettle Afghan allies through the United States government's Operation Allies Welcome (OAW). Part I focuses on introducing a few of the Afghan nationals who safeguarded our U.S. troops down range and how local U.S. government partners are rising to the occasion to help with job assistance, housing, education and making safe those that have been able to flee Afghanistan.

Ad Astra Per Aspera. "To the stars through difficulty", a loose translation of the Latin motto emblazoned upon the Kansas state flag. Chosen in the spirit of rugged exploration and the search for a better place to live on the American frontier in the 19th century by 'native-born' settlers and immigrants alike. Perhaps no motto best captures the story of our allies' struggle to rebrand their families in the traditions of the American Dream, while maintaining the bond to their proud Afghan culture and heritage.

Our story begins on a warm April day. Crossing the ever-rolling Flint Hills area of Kansas, I made the trek westward from Kansas City along I-70 to meet some Afghan allies and hear their story first hand and share in how their lives have changed since being welcomed into the U.S. under the aegis of Operation Allies Welcome, a joint program of the federal government to resettle those facing imminent danger from the Taliban regime.



(Above, Left to Right): Mohammad Idrees Khalil, Manhattan Housing Authority (MHA) Director Aaron Estabrook, resident Matiullah Shinwari, resident Anayatullah Alami (not pictured) at Flint Hills Place, an MHA Low Income Housing Tax Credit property where Mr. Khalil resides and shared a traditional Pashtun meal while sharing his account of coming to the United States recently.

Since the spring of 2021 and the fall of the government in Afghanistan, thousands of families - many that have had members fighting alongside U.S. forces for decades - are facing unspeakable horrors. Not the least of which is the unfathomable truth that if they flee their native country - they can almost certainly never come back. The following chronicles how Operation Allies Welcome came to be in Manhattan, Kansas and a bit about the families who have come here and their determination to make it their home while winning the hearts and minds of Kansans.

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Operation Allies Welcome and the Manhattan Afghan Resettlement Team

On August 29, 2021, President Biden directed the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to lead implementation of ongoing efforts across the federal government to support vulnerable Afghans, including those who worked alongside the U.S. in Afghanistan for the past two decades, as they safely resettle in the United States.

As stated on [HUD's website](#), certain Afghan nationals who were evacuated from Afghanistan, and granted humanitarian parole into the United States, may be eligible for the U.S. State Department's Afghan Placement and Assistance Program (APA). The Program will assist with initial relocation services for 30 to 90 days after arrival and as they begin to rebuild their lives in the United States.

The State Department and the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) are leading these resettlement and integration efforts in close coordination with over 200 resettlement organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and through the generous help of state and local officials around the country.

Since OAW's inception, HUD has played a role by fielding questions from local refugee resettlement agencies, making community connections, and participating in federal interagency working groups with the goal of identifying creative, sustainable, and affordable housing solutions. More information about HUD's role in OAW and funding streams can be found [here](#).

The Faces of Our Afghan Allies

Over the course of an afternoon and a wonderful spread of Afghan delicacies like roasted beef, grilled chicken, nuts, fruits and tea, the travels, tragedy and triumph of three men and their families helped bring into focus the immense gravity and scope of OAW's purpose, a partnership that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development - or HUD as it is commonly known - is a major player. HUD's main role is to help connect those coming to the U.S. with affordable housing and empowering local and state, as well as other federal partners, to house and integrate these brave households into the fabric of our communities.

There is no way that words can do justice to their tales. The terror and ongoing haunts of leaving the deep roots of a nation that has endured war for centuries and of a people that have been witness to the ebb and flow of both eastern and western civilizations' influence on mankind for a millennia - these experiences are transcendent. They are beyond the uninitiated's ability to grasp. But grasp we must. If only to recognize that federal initiatives like OAW, are about human beings. They are about people like ourselves. People that laugh, love, raise smiling children and long to do simple things like drive a car on an open road and have the luxury of simply planning for the idea of tomorrow.

The Manhattan Housing Authority (MHA), and more specifically its Executive Director Aaron Estabrook, has been responsible for the novel and expedient use of its program funds and accessing philanthropic streams of support, to help create a resettlement team capable of meeting the requirements of the State Department's ORR and APA programs. The creation of a Manhattan Afghan Resettlement Team (MART) is a 100% volunteer, 501c(3) non-profit. Its members have garnered local, state and academic institutional support leading to the current resettlement of over 73 Afghan nationals (46 children) since August 2021 alone. This is on top of 113 persons (67 children) that were assisted prior to August 2021 when the MART was formally stood up as a resettlement agency. The MART board anticipates acceptance of refugees through September 2022 with the possibility of expanding its mandate further to support Ukrainian refugees.

Operating under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas (CCNEK), MART volunteers work with those resettled to cover healthcare, education, food, social services, housing stability, employment, transportation and administrative needs to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. As refugees become more familiar with their new surroundings, many are giving back and have joined the board of the MART, helping to lead by example for the new refugees as they arrive. For example, Matiullah Shinawari, Mohammed Idrees Khalil and Anaytullah Alami - all featured in this story - are appointed members of the MART Board of Directors.



Above - The aftermath of a traditional Pashtun meal provided by our host Mr. Mohamed Idrees Khalil at his home. During the Ramadan season, Mr. Khalil and other Afghans in attendance abstained from the feast but were insistent that I and the housing authority director indulge. At the risk of giving offense - we 'reluctantly' agreed, gaining new friends and a few pounds extra in the process.

Estabrook, who in addition to being the housing authority executive director and until recently, a Manhattan city commissioner, spent time deployed in Afghanistan during 2009-2010 as a member of the United States Army. A stranger in a strange land, he was required to entrust his life and the lives of his soldiers to Afghan interpreters, never knowing in the beginning if they were truly there to help fight back against the Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgency or if they were just as inclined to place his team into danger. Time proved that the former was true and it left an indelible mark on Estabrook's heart and mind. The dedication shown to him and his soldiers was something he wanted to repay. When the opportunity came several years later in 2021 to help bring Afghans to Manhattan, he jumped at the chance. Summoning relationships with past military commanders now working at nearby Kansas State University, contacts in Washington D.C., local, state and federal elected officials - Estabrook led by example. His singular will is helping ensure that scores of Afghan families not only escape the atrocities of the Taliban, but have the resources necessary to become safe, secure and productive parts of our American experiment in democracy and self-governance. The MART team of volunteers and the expert leadership in place at all levels of the organization, as well as the many partnerships it has forged, are an example and an inspiration for other U.S. communities seeking to both help give a home to refugees looking for fresh start in the U.S.

Matiullah Shinwari

Matiullah Shinwari pulls double duty as both a bus driver for the local school district and is on the staff of the Manhattan Housing Authority (MHA) as special housing liaison for Operation Allies Welcome, assisting incoming Afghan families. In addition to being a dutiful father and husband, he also helped provide safety and interpretative services to the U.S. Army in 2009-10.

His story coming to the U.S. goes back to 2017 during a more stable time, when his past relationship with a young army specialist would bring him to the Midwest. It is a source of immense pride that he helped protect young American soldiers so far from home, but it still came with personal loss. Because of his U.S. support, one of Matiullah's three brothers was killed. While he regrets nothing about his choice to come here, he worries daily about his other brothers and family members now that the Taliban run the country.

In Afghanistan, Matiullah was an esteemed man, a teacher shaping the mind of a free nation. When coming to the U.S., it was difficult losing that identity. He came here without documentation of his education, no access to needed credentials and therefore was limited to what he felt was more menial employment. But the more time he spent here and watched his children begin to excel in English and an American classroom, he adopted a new perspective, one rooted deeply in the American experience - that as a first generation American, his personal pride and prosperity mattered less and that his children's roles and future were the true source of his identity and self-worth.

When asked if he missed Afghanistan or if he hoped for his children to one day return to a free and democratic country, his response was a bit unexpected. " Our kids do not desire to remember Afghanistan. They don't want that connection. The Taliban have taken that from them - it is gone. They are Americans now and this is their home. It is the only home they will ever know."

Matiullah is full of pride for his adopted home on the prairie. He breaks character from his normal quiet self, gleefully recounting how he originally wanted to come to California when going through the re-settlement process. But through sheer happenstance, he ended up in Manhattan. One might conclude that the open range of Kansas pales in comparison to the majesty and allure of the mountains and glamour of California's beaches. But after speaking with other re-settled families that made it to Los Angeles and experienced the high cost of living - the Sunflower state certainly had its advantages.

Mohammed Idrees Khalil

Mohammed Idrees Khalil was a former Department of Defense (DoD) contractor. A stoic man, simple and purposeful, he welcomes me into his home. It is a four-bedroom tax credit property owned and operated by the Manhattan Housing Authority. Its simple beige palette, the perfect backdrop for the telling of his epic journey to the U.S., thousands of miles in the making.

Unlike Matiullah, Mohammed held a more robust affinity for potentially remaining in his home country. His dream was never to be anywhere else. He simply wanted to see Afghanistan continue in the traditions of progress and hospitality it had become known for while taking a more prominent role on the world stage. He opined that:

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"The thought of abandoning my country, my family, and my life in Afghanistan did not often cross my mind. I had a strong unbroken tie with the land; the land that gives me identity, and that taught me to respect and love humanity. For 20 years, my dream, like that of so many other Afghans, was not to depart, but to instead become positive agents of social change in the country. We wanted to help improve the country for our people, children, and future generations. So, we had dreamed, worked hard, and sacrificed so much for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan."

All of that was shattered once the Taliban marched into Kabul. It was in this exact moment that he decided he and family were going to leave Afghanistan - forever. That decision did not come without peril. For days they tried to reach the airport where allied forces were trying to get families out. Day in and day out the road was littered with people and cars, exhaustion and confusion were paired with the onslaught of Taliban fighters roaming the streets intimidating people to break their spirit. On his final day, Mohammed relayed how one of his children desperately pleaded to go back home, they didn't want to go to America. But they were too tired and too naïve to understand there was no home to go back to. Even worse, as they made the miles long trip from the outskirts of Kabul to the airport, a roadside bomb exploded as the family was so close to the plane. They escaped unharmed, but 180 others perished including American soldiers. The mental damage was done though. While they reached the plane safely - any hope of a free Afghanistan was annihilated with the aftershock of the explosion.

There is a silver lining in his account. Sitting on the floor, tens of thousands of miles from that struggle, Mohammed ran through how his journey from Afghanistan was a whirlwind of people and places. Stops in the Middle East, then Europe seemed to stitch together. Time was measured less in days, hours and minutes and more in bureaucratic forms from one country and organization to another. It was about two months all told in route between Afghanistan until his family reached the United States. Once on the ground, it was another three months till reaching Manhattan. Arriving late at night in a place and a culture as foreign to them as they were to it, nonetheless, they stepped off the plane to a chorus of support. People assembled with food, blankets and other items needed to begin a new life. But what Mohammed remembers most - what his whole family remembers - is the generosity of spirit a complete stranger like himself was given when he needed it most. Mohammed has arrived in the U.S. but his story is just beginning. The day we talked he shared a message of hope buoyed by the fact that he had recently received his Kansas driver's license and took a test drive in a new car. Behind the wheels of a new sedan, on the open highways, he found himself looking outward and onward. Generations of Americans have yearned for the freedom and possibility that comes with four wheels. It seems that ideal is still very much alive in the heart of Mohammed as he navigates what becoming an American means for he and his family.

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Right: Mohammed Idrees Khalil's home at the Flint Hills complex on the outskirts of Manhattan. The area provides open space for his kids to play. It also houses a number of other resettled households. That proximity has helped foster a better transition in Khalil's opinion. It creates a support system of other like minded people and helps stave off things like homesickness and helps to maintain a linkage to their former lives. Khalil notes that while the housing is helpful, even at the 4-bedroom size, the largest generally for public and tax credit projects, it is still sometimes too confining for the larger extended families that Afghans are used to. Ideally, Afghan refugees can be housed near other Afghan families in a communal setting but a challenge many Afghan's face is what will happen as more families come to the area and things like the use of housing vouchers and the pursuit or employment outside the support of the MART volunteers, necessitate more cultural isolation. Is that a concern of a resettlement program or is that just part of overall U.S. community development? The Authority's director, Aaron Estabrook, hopes in earnest to tackle this issue as part of his ongoing housing plan, but realizes the resettlement agency effort may not be able to sustain that level of focus and resources for the time needed to adequately integrate all families, especially if the MART takes on additional efforts with the ever growing Ukrainian crisis.



Anaytullah Alami

I was not privileged to meet with him in person, but his personal narrative coming to the U.S. was a case study in patriotism and duty that most of us that have lived here our whole lives still fail to understand. When asked what message he would leave with the American public, he said this:

"Just tell them we want their happiness and satisfaction. Tell them we are not the sort of people to become burden and liability, instead we are here to help you serve you and join you. Tell them we hope to be useful and best citizens of our new country. Tell them we love them for the soldiers who helped us who happens to be your sons, daughters, brothers, sisters or compatriots."

That Anaytullah was a longtime program manager supporting U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) strengthening of democratic norms in Afghanistan after years of Taliban autocratic rule, says a lot about his message to his new homeland. As the former editor of a paper critical of the Taliban, his adherence to the rule of law within a democratic system put a target on his head.

Knowing this, he was forced to leave the country in secret. His family and friends not knowing his whereabouts until he was safely in Qatar far from the Taliban reach. He has no fear or regret coming to the U.S. much like Matiullah. He is glad to be here and to know that he gave his best and that his family will go from being in one of the poorest countries in the world to one of the richest. The opportunity and potential are not lost on him. But coming here wasn't all easy.

Certainly not one to complain, he does note that it is a cultural adjustment for those making the trip to the U.S. through OAW and the placement program. Initial housing options are generally hotels - many too small to accommodate the culturally large families. The transition to more permanent housing through agencies like the Manhattan Housing Authority are a blessing he notes. But re-settlement is a long process for it to work right. The idea that one can become settled in 90 days once in the U.S is unrealistic. (OAW generally allows re-settlement agencies this amount of time to place a family while still receiving federal funding). These families, his family, have been through major trauma. It will take years to work through the process in order to be a productive citizen - something he and virtually all re-settled families want. But they need time and space to grieve the home they lost, so they can love the home they have found he says.

What's next?

In part II of this series, we will explore a bit more on where these men and their families have settled since coming to the United States. Each has and continues to work through the trauma of losing a homeland while fully committing themselves to finding a place to start anew. We will also examine more about how the MART is serving as an example and inspiring other communities nationwide to join in the welcoming of our Afghan allies. More and more communities, largely through the effort of veterans of the Afghan and Iraqi wars like Aaron Estabrook, are seeking to help resettle families both out of sense of duty and many from an economic necessity as their populations dwindle due to demographic shifts and the impact of a globalized world.

A broader look at the way the Afghan Placement and Assistance program and the future of Operation Allies Welcome, specifically the challenges to housing refugees and displaced persons and ensuring access to supportive services, will be discussed in the next part of this story covering the process of resettlement.



Above left - Then Specialist Aaron Estabrook prior to his tenure at the Manhattan Housing Authority. His service in uniform greatly influenced his public service ethic and his commitment to re-settling the Afghan people.

Below right - Estabrook (far left seated) continuing his commitment to the Afghan people brokering a conversation with two current resettled allies and now MART board members and HUD Region 7 leadership in August 2022 (Administrator Ulysses Clayborn, Deputy Administrator Bruce Ladd and Kansas/ Western Missouri Director Jose Davis)

