Three years on, Afghan evacuees strive to nd their place in D.C. region

In this Tuesday, Aug. 31, 2021, photo, families evacuated from Kabul, Afghanistan, walk through the terminal to board a bus after they arrived at Washington Dulles International Airport, in Chantilly, Va. U.S. religious groups of many faiths are gearing up ... In this Tuesday, Aug. 31, 2021, ... more >

By Stephen Dinan
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For Mohammad Pashtun, an Afghan evacuee who made it to the U.S., one of the weirder transitions was learning to deal with American scammers.

He was driving for Lyft when he got a weird call telling him that a customer was challenging his identity. The caller asked for all his personal information. Luckily, Mr. Pashtun had been through an orientation with Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area that included warnings about scams.

He was immediately wary, and he hung up and called Lyft which told him they had nothing to do with the call.

“Over here, everything is more online and people have to know how to defend,” he told The Washington Times. “I will never give my Social Security number.”

Mr. Pashtun’s experience tracks thousands of other Afghans who arrived since the fall of their home country in 2021. Trained as an engineer, he quickly found out his degree was virtually meaningless here. What matters in the U.S. economy is certifications, and those he lacked.

Now he’s trying to get those certifications. He is about to take exams to become a concrete inspector. In the meantime, he stopped driving for Lyft so he could focus on English classes. He’s also on Task Rabbit where he offers electrical and plumbing repairs.

Three years after the fall of Kabul, the Afghan evacuee experiment is still very real — both for the evacuees themselves and for the communities striving to welcome them.

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More are still trickling in, though it’s a fraction of the rushed days of late 2021, when they arrived by the tens of thousands, hastily whisked out of Kabul and sent to resettlement camps at U.S. military bases then released into communities to try to find their way.

The federal government would eventually pony up some assistance, but at first, it was all aid organizations seeking to connect the new arrivals with rental homes, help them find jobs and deliver a crash course in American culture.

Afghans who’d never had to worry about their credit suddenly had to build a financial portfolio to be able to rent a home. Lutheran Social Services and other aid organizations helped them sign up for Social Security, get a driver’s license, enroll kids in school and get them immunized.

LSSNCA said the community rushed to help. A Jewish community center offered use of its showers for the new arrivals. Mosques provided culturally appropriate clothing.

“We had so many donations, this community is so generous that we no longer had a place to put the donations. We were operating between piles of boxes,” said Kristyn Peck, CEO of Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area.

LSSNCA delivered assistance to 4,500 Afghans in the first year.

Three years on, the arrivals have slowed dramatically but they're still trickling in. And LSSNCA said the needs are persistent, albeit different.

Volunteer drivers are particularly in demand as migrants need to be taken to job interviews or other important appointments. Buying a vehicle is usually beyond their means. They could try to take public transportation but that can be tricky to go longer distances, and they could take a ride share but that can be expensive for new arrivals struggling with finances.

Also needed are tutors for kids settling into American schools, and mentors for adults trying to find their way in a new culture and a new job.

Doctors, lawyers and even military-trained jet pilots in Afghanistan find themselves struggling to match their skills with jobs here.

They also rushed to improve their English and figure out aspects of American life that had no parallel in Afghanistan.

"Here I didn't have even my license, my Social Security [number], no credit," said Ziaullah Amini, an IT specialist who'd worked for 10 years with the U.S. Army and State Department.

He spent his first three months — with the help of LSSNCA — getting a license, completing his Social Security forms and landing an entry-level job in data entry. Though below his IT skills, he still labeled it a good experience as his first American job.

LSSNCA helped him get his network engineer certifications and he landed what he calls his "dream job."

"I'm very thankful, especially for LSS," he said. "These agencies are a bridge."

Hasib Satary, the group's director of employment services in Virginia, said they placed more than 500 people in jobs last year alone.

The U.S. inspector general charged with overseeing America's efforts in Afghanistan has been studying the experience of evacuees and found significant disillusionment and clinical depression.

New arrivals struggle with establishing credit and learning English. Ex-Afghan military members reported feeling abandoned by the U.S. over there and miffed that the troops American troops they worked with for so many years haven't reached out here.

The ongoing deterioration of things in their home country weighs heavily on the new arrivals, many of whom are sending money back to relatives. They've watched as the Taliban has banished women from much of public life.

Afghan women who made it to the U.S., meanwhile, reported experiencing suicidal thoughts to the inspector general.

"Unable to speak English, often illiterate, and stuck at home in small apartments with lots of children, they find themselves isolated in the United States," the inspector general concluded.

The inspector general also spoke with evacuees who made their way to Canada and found they had many of the same issues surrounding jobs and culture shock.

"However, there was one important difference between each group's experience: while the interviewees in the United States were primarily concerned about their uncertain future legal status, Afghans in Canada had the legal right to stay permanently, although some were not sure they wanted to," the inspector general said.

The Afghans The Times spoke with seemed to be adjusting better than those the inspector general spoke with. However, they pointed to challenges such as the high cost of living in the Washington area and the need for two incomes.

In the beginning, there's some government financial support for new families, though that evaporates after a few months and people quickly realize one income may not be enough, Mr. Satary said. And having a wife work outside of the home clashes with cultural norms in much of Afghanistan.

"There are people that are coming from some villages and provinces of Afghanistan where they are not accepting a female going to work, culturally. They'll say, 'I'll go work two shifts, [I'm] not letting my wife go to work,'" Mr. Satary said. "I see why. A lot of them, because their wife never worked and they don't want to force her."

There's also a childcare reality, given that birth rates are higher among Afghans and the wife is the one who stays home to watch them. Lutheran Social Services tries to connect the women with local programs that provide childcare.

"We are giving them all this advice and tips that if you want to have a better life for yourself and your family you'd better have two people working," Mr. Satary said.

He said that message is helped by the experience of Afghan families who have adjusted to the economic realities.

That includes himself. He said his wife hadn't worked in Afghanistan, but when they arrived in Northern Virginia she took courses at the community college and then approached him to suggest going to work.

Mr. Satary and Mr. Pashtun said English is a major hurdle for many Afghan evacuees. Those who worked with the U.S. war effort usually brought some knowledge, though even then there were so many translators that it made the need to learn English less pressing.

Mr. Pashtun said he wished he'd started learning the language earlier.

Food has also been a transition. He said the additives in American food were affecting his health, and he started getting allergies.

"Now I buy everything organic," he said.

Mr. Pashtun's wife also helped assist the U.S. effort by working with the U.S. Agency for International Development. She earned her special visa in

2017 and came several years before Mr. Pashtun.

She's now working as a finance officer and has already earned U.S. citizenship. Mr. Pashtun said she's voting in her first American election this year.

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