

HELPING OUR NEW AFGHAN NEIGHBORS LEARN, EARN, BELONG, & CONTRIBUTE

BUSH INSTITUTE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Afghans being welcomed to the United States as they travel to Fort Pickett, Va., to begin their resettlement process. (Marine Corps Cpl. Corey A. Mathews / U.S. Department of Defense)



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The Biden Administration expects to resettle 95,000 Afghan evacuees in communities across the United States by September 2022. Only Hawaii, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming aren't slated to receive any in the first wave of resettlements.

Immigrants and refugees have contributed to our communities since America's inception, and we are well served when we offer a helping hand in the short term so that they can rebuild their lives. Afghan evacuees are not a monolith. Some come to the United States with strong English proficiency and years of experience working as entrepreneurs or community leaders or for the United States military. Others, especially women, have had limited opportunities to achieve an education or learn English. City governments and resettlement agencies cannot respond to these diverse needs on their own.

Because of this, the State Department launched a partnership with the nonprofit Welcome.US to coordinate the resettlement efforts to meet these disparate needs and encourage groups working with Afghan evacuees to think creatively about how they can channel their unique skills and resources to help our new Afghan neighbors. President and Mrs. Bush, President and Mrs. Obama, and President Clinton and Secretary Clinton are honorary co-chairs of the effort, highlighting the necessity for a whole-country response to the challenge (and opportunity) presented.

State and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and private-sector companies all have important roles to play. In the short term, evacuees need housing, clothes, furniture, and other basic supplies. Over the next several months and years, policy and practice change is needed to ensure that our new Afghan neighbors learn, earn, belong, and contribute to the United States.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND PROSPERITY

Afghan evacuees are arriving in the United States with almost nothing. Their savings accounts have been frozen, the lives they worked hard to build distilled into the items they can carry with them on a plane. Finding remunerative employment will be the most important factor in helping them to rebuild their lives in the United States. Most Afghan evacuees will get 90 days of assistance from the U.S. government, but then they will be on their own to find work to support their families.

A key issue facing refugees and evacuees is underemployment, or "brain waste." Immigrant graduates with health care degrees are more than twice as likely as their U.S.-born peers to be underemployed, according to a [Migration Policy Institute](#) analysis. Many Afghan evacuees have degrees, certifications, and professional work experience. But we

know that immigrants frequently struggle to transfer their skills, licenses, and credentials into jobs in their field in the United States, often because of licensing rules, policies, and cultural norms that limit their opportunities. This makes it harder for immigrants to integrate into American society, but it also prevents the U.S. economy from benefitting from the skills and talents that they bring.

All 50 states are experiencing labor shortages that are rippling through the economy. Afghan evacuees can help fill these roles, but city governments, local employers, economic development agencies, and chambers of commerce need to develop strategies to connect evacuees to family supporting employment opportunities.

Businesses should reach out to evacuee communities with job and training opportunities.

The fastest way to connect refugees and evacuees to employment is for businesses to reach out proactively to refugee communities with job and training opportunities. Many private-sector players are already doing just that.

Fifty-six companies – including Amazon, Pfizer, and Chobani – have pledged to create job opportunities and provide training resources for Afghan evacuees as part of the [Tent Coalition for Afghan Refugees](#). The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation formed the [Coalition for Afghan Refugee Employment](#) with the goal of connecting Afghan evacuees with employers and training services. Welcome.US created the [Welcome.US Jobs Exchange](#), where Afghan evacuees can apply for jobs posted by U.S. employers in one centralized location.

State and local governments should work with community colleges to develop skills-training programs aimed at evacuees.

English-language learning programs

Afghan evacuees will come to the United States with varying degrees of English proficiency. Some served as translators for the United States and have strong English skills, while others do not speak English well or at all.

Learning basic English is an important step for Afghans looking for employment and should be a top priority for those who are not proficient. Local nonprofit organizations and community colleges can help by connecting evacuees to basic English classes.

These organizations must also consider the specific needs of Afghan women when designing programs. Afghan women are less likely to be English proficient and will face barriers to participation such as lack of transportation and child care. Given that English proficiency is an important first step to securing employment, ensuring that language learning programs are accessible to women should be prioritized.

Evacuees with basic proficiency – and the knowledge and experience to secure high-skilled employment – would benefit from advanced English courses. Employers can help by offering professional English-language classes as part of professional-development programs.

Skills training or credentialing programs

Some evacuees will need or want to enroll in education or skills-training programs on their paths to finding employment. Many of the same programs that have been developed for Americans will be relevant for evacuees; but state and local governments, as well as community colleges and employers, can go further by offering occupational training programs that are specifically designed for refugees and evacuees. The [Utah Refugee Center](#) offers occupational training programs that lead to certifications, such as information technology and warehouse skills.

Another tool that will help Afghan refugees connect with work opportunities is programs offering “microcredentials” – widely recognized, industry-standard certificates that demonstrate in-demand skills in fields like information technology and health care. Community colleges and other education providers are rapidly expanding their microcredential programs and increasingly designing them so that students can stack them toward completion of an associate or bachelor’s degree.

States and localities should create accelerated licensing programs for immigrants, in conjunction with broader occupational licensing reform.

Organizations that issue licenses and certifications such as state and local governments and industry associations can help by creating accelerated programs for immigrants to transfer their foreign credentials to equivalent U.S. ones. These programs already exist in certain professions. For example, CGFNS International helps health care workers transfer their credentials so that they can seek employment outside their home countries.

States and localities should also reform their occupational licensing requirements to decrease burdens on people looking to enter new fields or start an entrepreneurial venture. License requirements serve important functions in certain fields, but they can also create unnecessary costs that disproportionately affect immigrants. Licensing requirements should be harmonized across states whenever possible, so that a move to a new state doesn’t mean starting the licensing process from scratch.

Businesses should evaluate immigrants’ skills or competencies when hiring – as opposed to looking for specific education or experience.

Most jobs in the United States don’t require a license or certification, but instead rely on education and job experience. Immigrants are at a disadvantage in this way, as well. Many struggle to translate their foreign work experience into a similar job in the United States, and employers tend to favor work experience in the United States. Cultural and workplace norms in the United States can also be a barrier for job seekers from other countries.

The private sector can make a big impact by utilizing an immigrant-inclusive lens in hiring and making a concerted effort to employ Afghan evacuees. This may include taking extra time to understand the foreign qualifications of an applicant or offering training programs that help immigrants learn about American workplace norms.

Local governments, nonprofits, and businesses should connect Afghan entrepreneurs to training and resources.

Beyond traditional employment, we know that immigrants tend to start businesses at higher rates than the American-born population. Eighteen percent of all U.S. business owners are immigrants, while immigrants make up 13.5% of the U.S. population. In 2018, 30% of all new entrepreneurs were immigrants. Economic development agencies, innovation centers, and incubators should ensure immigrants are aware of existing entrepreneurship support programs – such as microlending, mentorship, and business accelerators.

GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP AND INCLUSIVITY

Afghan evacuees will need varying degrees of support from their communities over the next several years. As they continue to rebuild their lives, local governments must make sure that evacuees understand how government works and what services are available to residents.

Local governments should educate evacuees about their rights and responsibilities.

It's not enough to have programs available to evacuees. All parts of local government must ensure Afghan – and other immigrant – communities are informed of services and programs and know how to access them.

These messages are most effective when trusted messengers deliver them. Several states and localities have implemented community navigator programs that train community members to serve as liaisons between immigrant communities and the local government and social service providers.

Local governments should implement language-access policies.

If evacuees are not proficient in English when they arrive in the United States, they may struggle to understand their rights and responsibilities as residents of their local community. While connecting evacuees to English-language learning programs is an important step on the way to integration, it takes months to learn a new language. Cities should implement language-access policies that allow Afghan evacuees to interact with local governments in the meantime.

Ideally, this would mean offering government information in the languages that immigrants in the communities are most likely to speak – in this case, Dari and Pashto. A more practical step for many small cities is ensuring that English-language websites and documents are written at an appropriate reading level for those who are learning English.

Local governments should partner with local service organizations to meet the needs of evacuees.

Implementing the programs and policies necessary to create welcoming cities for immigrants can be a daunting task for local governments. Even larger cities may only have one or two employees dedicated to immigrant affairs, and small cities likely have no dedicated staff. City governments should seek out partnerships with local nonprofits to help execute these programs wherever possible. In many cities, local service providers are already embedded in immigrant communities and have deep knowledge of their needs.



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