



Greetings!

We are now three months into the Petaluma Afghan Allies Project and have been encouraged by the outpouring of interest and support from volunteers both here in Petaluma, and throughout Sonoma County. With the established refugee resettlement agencies staggering under the weight of the largest wave of refugees to the U.S. since the 1970s, grassroots community efforts like ours are coming together across the country to help shoulder the responsibility of caring for those who aided our military, diplomatic, and development personnel in Afghanistan.

We welcomed one more family of refugees here to Petaluma just after the new year, which brings the total number of families up to eight, with nineteen adults and twenty-three children ranging in age from a few months to 18 years. That number is not expected to grow at this time. As you can imagine, there is still much to be done to help these newcomers recover from their traumatic escape from Afghanistan and adjust successfully to an unfamiliar culture and new home. This newsletter brings you up to date on what we have been doing so far, and what is most needed now.

### **Completing The First Phase**

In November and December when the first Afghan families arrived in Petaluma, our

efforts were focused on basic needs such as furnishing apartments, supplying clothing, getting children enrolled in school and connecting the families with other government services. Food pick-up was organized for the families through the food bank at the Family Resource Center at McDowell School and also at Elim Lutheran Church. Access to transportation was an urgent need and we worked to help families navigate transit options and understand bus routes and fares, address language barriers, as well as other obstacles.

Almost all of the Afghan women are now enrolled at the Petaluma Adult School (PAS) in ESL classes. Additionally, we have set up a variety of classrooms and instructors to continue teaching English between breaks in the PAS semesters. A number of the men are working full-time and also taking ESL classes. Tutoring has proven to be a valuable tool for both teaching English and cultural exchange between volunteers and families.

As life has begun to settle into a somewhat normal pattern, we are continuing some of these forms of support, but also shifting our efforts to new areas that will aid the families in the long-term transition to self-sufficiency. The critical shortage of affordable housing in our area will be the greatest challenge facing the families as their initial sponsorship comes to an end over the coming months.

### **Rolling Out New Programs**

On February 5th we held the first of what will be ongoing monthly meetings with the Afghan Families at Casa Grande High School. At that meeting, we hosted guest speaker Elliot Enriquez of the Petaluma Health Center (PHC) who spoke with the Afghan families about PHC and its services. We also introduced the families to two of the volunteer programs we have been organizing over the past couple of months. The first of these is a Rides Program, which allows families to schedule rides with volunteer drivers. We have equipped a volunteer coordinator with a dedicated mobile phone so the refugee families have a number they can call or text to request rides for grocery shopping, medical appointments, professional and legal services, and more.

The second program we introduced at the meeting is Family Friends. We held two volunteer orientation meetings in January and were able to match each of our Afghan families with two families of local residents. The families on both sides of the relationship have received one another's contact information and will now begin to get acquainted. Family Friends will function as an informal source of cultural orientation and moral support, and help alert our Steering Committee and volunteer teams to needs we might not otherwise be aware of. We will be organizing monthly meetings of the Family Friends for information-sharing and mutual support beginning in March.

### **Steering Committee: Organizing New Volunteer Teams**

On January 27th we held the first meeting of the newly-formed Afghan Allies Steering Committee. The Steering Committee aims to track the overall progress of the Afghan Allies Project, anticipate how the needs of the refugee families are changing, and help extend this effort to the broader community. Members include Brenda Barrett and Paul

Petersen, both of whom have professional backgrounds in international development, including direct work experience in Afghanistan, Gail Reid, Frances Frazier, and Rev. Daniel Green of St. John's Episcopal Church, Lani Slonim of B'nai Israel Jewish Center, and Ellen Barbieri who helped pioneer the Family Friends program.

Brenda Barrett and Gail Reid are involved in organizing a team to help the refugees reformat their resumes and network with potential employers in the area. If you have experience or interest in refugee resettlement, and/or connections with non-profit, interfaith, and volunteer networks in Sonoma County we welcome additional members to the Steering Committee.

### **Refining Our Volunteer Efforts**

As we gain insight and experience into providing resettlement resources to our Afghan families, the picture looks a little different now than when we first began. We have a particular need at this time for volunteer coordinators for specific programs and are still looking for a few folks who can take the lead in organizing other volunteers.

Some specific areas where additional leadership is needed include:

- Driver education to help adult drivers with learner's permits get on-the-road experience in order to obtain driver's licenses.
- Education in basic household financial literacy and management.
- Donated goods: identifying needs, soliciting, gathering, distributing donations.

Besides volunteer coordination in these areas, we have additional needs for:

- Drivers! If you haven't already signed up to be a driver and are interested, please visit our [volunteer intake form](#).
- Are you an immigration law professional? Are you willing to do a little pro-bono work on the side for a good cause? Let us know!

Finally, we encourage you to watch this [YouTube video](#) from Dr. Valerie Smith of the Public Health faculty at Cal State East Bay and the Afghan Coalition, which provides a comprehensive overview of the ongoing Afghan refugee crisis. You can find the slide show from the video [here](#).

Thank you again for your kindness,

The Petaluma Afghan Allies Team



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