

# CHICAGO HIGHLIGHTS

December 13 – 16, 2023

With the help of 56 service providers, our team arranged much-needed support for 1,230 Afghans - 61.5 percent of the newly arrived population in the Greater Chicago and Southern Wisconsin area. While we cannot share every amazing story from our event, we can shine the spotlight on a handful of compassionate professionals who made a significant difference for so many families. We look forward to continuing our work in Raleigh-Durham on January 17 – 20 at the Durham Convention Center. For more information, please visit [Centers for Afghan Support](#).

[Upwardly Global](#) is a national non-profit working to help immigrants and refugees restart their careers in the United States. Statistics show that nearly half of recently arrived immigrants have at least a bachelor's degree, yet many face systemic barriers that leave them unemployed or underemployed.



Program Director **Bethany Atkins** and Senior Employment Advisor **Tamar Frolichstein-Appel** discussed the importance of eliminating bias among recruiters and hiring managers. Too often, companies are only looking at resumes and making decisions without considering the larger context. They may not understand why candidates have gaps in their work histories or are willing to search for transferable skills. Starting out, many immigrants take entry-level roles to provide for their families. When applying for a new job, a hiring manager may simply see the most recent job as an Uber driver and not even consider the candidate. Therefore, the team spends time educating corporations on the reality of what this population has experienced and what an asset these men and women would be to any organization.

Tamar discussed a recent experience working with a doctor from Afghanistan. Licensure, exam and residency requirements are significant barriers to resuming a medical career in a new country. She was connected to online training courses in clinical research, allowing her to utilize her impressive skills and knowledge in a less regulated environment. Today, she is working at a medical research company and gaining more skills critical to her advancement.

Tamar stressed how many opportunities are available in the healthcare industry for those with advanced skills. The key is finding roles with lower barriers to entry and quickly progressing with on-the-job training.

Created by the U.S. Marine Corps, [Toys for Tots](#) collects new toys and distributes them to children in need across America. Their work offers children recognition, confidence and positive memories, helping them on their journey toward becoming responsible and caring members of their community. Since its creation, Toys for Tots has distributed more than 60 million toys to 272 million youth.

Over the course our four-day event, Marine Reservist **Dalton Glover** delivered more than 500 games, toys, stuffed animals, dolls, books and puzzles to the Support Center. Hundreds of guests visited the donations table, leaving with toys for Christmas and sharing their thanks for the incredible generosity.

Dalton talked about the power of their work and why he is so passionate about the cause. "Our mission right now is to put a smile on kids' faces for Christmas. So many families we serve do not have the money to buy their children anything for the holidays. When we can help them with gifts, they are so excited. That is just special."



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**Kaar Poh** is a Chicago-based employment agency started in early 2023 by **Siam Pasarly**. Siam left Afghanistan with little more than his laptop in August 2021 and has been working tirelessly to rebuild his life in America. In Afghanistan, Siam provided communications counsel to the World Bank and the Afghan Chamber of Commerce. At Kaar Poh, he is helping hundreds of immigrants find new careers in positions ranging from construction to security to janitorial and facilities maintenance. Siam has partnered with career coach **Robert Farrell**, who offers resume writing services and interview coaching classes to clients.



In 2023, the organization held numerous job fairs across the greater Chicago region. The events attracted more than 700 attendees and 30 employers, connecting more than 50 to jobs in the area. Next year, Siam plans to hold at least six events as he recognizes the need will be even greater as public funding will likely be scarcer. Kaar Poh encourages job seekers to be narrowly focused on what they are pursuing to expedite the search process. Siam knows how important learning English is to find higher-paying work, but in the meantime, he has found success matching clients in entry-level positions while they learn the language.

While Siam is happy to be in Chicago and helping so many people, he also misses his family and previous life. After the evacuation, his wife and children relocated and now live in Germany. Given his previous work and his wife's focus on women's rights, they have experienced many threats. He is a father to a 19-month-old son he has not yet met. Siam has applied for family reunification but knows it is a long and difficult process.

"When I first arrived, it was February, and I was so cold," Siam said. I thought to myself if the Taliban didn't kill me, the cold just might. But summer soon came, and it was wonderful. I fell in love with Chicago."

Housing Director **Gisele Hennings** of **Northside Community Resources** works with immigrants and refugees who need affordable housing in the Chicago area. Their team recently held a housing fair, giving Afghans and other newly arriving immigrants the opportunity to ask questions about signing leases, the home-buying process, financing solutions, establishing credit, fair housing practices and other related issues. Their goal is to provide detailed information about the entire process, ensuring their clients are as informed as possible.

Language continues to be a major barrier for Afghans. Gisele commented on hearing reports of Afghans agreeing to a price during the lease application process, only to be quoted a higher price when it was time to sign documents. She also voiced her concern for the dwindling supply of rental assistance to be able to keep families in housing.

Gisele spoke about her passion for this work: "I wanted to get out of the corporate world and do something of value. In my first role, they were considering dropping their housing program, and I said if you hire me full-time, I will handle it. Advocating for more affordable housing is my passion."





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Admissions Counselors **Shavaise Thomas** and **Ashleigh Flemons** represented [Joilet Job Corps](#) at the Support Center. Job Corps is the nation's largest residential job training and education program, serving 16- to 24-year-olds. They focus on helping students get the experience they need to begin a career, apprenticeship or advance to higher education. Funded by the Department of Labor, Job Corps is free to all students and offers housing, meals, basic health care and a living allowance.

After students enroll, the next step is a career assessment. Counselors ask students about fields of interest, assess skills and learn more about their situation. Based on this information, the next step is 30 to 60 days of getting acclimated to campus, shadowing trades and asking questions. Once the initial foundation is established, students enroll in high-growth trades ranging from construction to hospitality to information technology. Finally, career transition specialists help students build resumes and work toward employment and independent living skills.

Shavise said too few people know about the opportunities at Job Corps, and she is determined to let the Afghan community know about the many career paths available to them. "I wish I would have known about it while I was growing up. It would have been very helpful to me."

Ashleigh is a graduate of the Joilet location, returning to the organization after roles as a pharmacy technician. She said it is the best job she has ever had. Ashleigh is so encouraged by the number of people they are helping. "There are so many different reasons students are here, but they are all working toward the goal of self-sufficiency. It is an amazing thing to watch."



**James Lambert** and **Marium Baker** from the [U.S Department of Labor](#) worked with Afghans in Chicago to ensure attendees were aware of the crucial services available to them. Their work helps people earn high school diplomas, connect them to job training, enroll in college, find meaningful careers and reach economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.

For newly arriving immigrants, it can be difficult to take the first steps or even know where to start. [CareerOneStop.org](#) helps users locate a nearby American Job Center to assess their skills and abilities. While there, experienced career counselors can identify their interests and advise them on in-demand jobs and potential training opportunities. Many also offer recruiting events, workshops on resume writing, interviewing skills and job search activities. If participants meet a few basic requirements, staff can provide case management services immediately while work authorizations and other documentation issues are still being processed.

After this event, the Department of Labor is planning additional events in the region and looking for opportunities to increase collaboration with local service providers. Their team was encouraged by the turnout, strong partnerships and creative ways to continue serving the Afghan population.