

PITTSBURGH HIGHLIGHTS

July 19th – 22nd, 2023

With the help of 70 providers in Pittsburgh, our team was able to reach 469 Afghans (47 percent of the local, newly arriving population) and get them the support they needed. The services delivered were valuable and appreciated, as 73 percent of guests said they were very or extremely satisfied with their experience. While we cannot share every amazing story from our work, 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 at the DoubleTree, Seattle Airport, August 16 through 19. For more information, please visit centersforafghansupport.org.

Alex Marks and Harriett Riley of [Dress for Success Pittsburgh](#) brought a mobile boutique to the Support Center. The organization serves women across five counties in the region who are experiencing a life transition or may be starting the search for work by providing appropriate attire for job interviews, uniforms and casual everyday wear. Beyond clothing, they offer a network of support to help women thrive in life. Their team works closely with other non-profits and community-based organizations to bring their services to clients with limited transportation options. Alex stressed they want to meet women where they are and provide clothing that brings out the confidence she knows each of them has inside.

During the event, Harriett spoke about watching clients try on a jacket and seeing their body language instantly transform, tapping into the positive energy that is already there. She also shared how the more than 20 clients they worked with were so happy and thankful to have access to this service and the team's support.



[The Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) and [The Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) led a listening discussion with affordable housing providers. The goal was to hear about their challenges and discuss collaborative, creative solutions to meet the increasing number of Afghan immigrants in the region. Creating more capacity was mentioned as a top priority. Providers talked about how many clients have larger families making it difficult to find accommodations quickly. Like other cities, the Pittsburgh area is experiencing a shortage of affordable housing options. This is particularly true in urban areas, which are key to connecting Afghans to higher-paying jobs, public transportation and community resources. The problem is exacerbated by investors buying housing for rental property use. When unable to find suitable housing, organizations rely on fundraising and private contributions to house families in hotels on a short-term basis until more permanent accommodations can be found. Increasing communication with landlords and property managers is key. Too often, a lack of information makes renting to low-income immigrant families challenging.

In response, ORR and the State Department have created [Refugee Housing Solutions](#). RHS works closely with resettlement partners, landlords and property managers, refugees and volunteers across the U.S., creating innovative solutions to increase the availability and affordability of housing.



After hearing about the Support Center from a case manager, **Mohammad** and **Wazhma** drove from Rhode Island with their five children to check on the status of his asylum case and to look for economic opportunities. Mohammad speaks four languages and volunteers at a refugee resettlement agency as an interpreter. His wife is a seamstress and tailor. In Afghanistan, Mohammad supported the U.S. government in various roles, including communications and journalism. He heard many stories about the opportunities to start a small business in the United States and is focused on pursuing that goal.

[USCIS](#) reviewed Mohammad's case and connected him to an officer in their Boston office who will share additional updates and keep him informed about the potential path forward. The couple arrived late on Friday afternoon after their eight-hour drive. With the help of volunteers, the family was able to afford a hotel room so they could spend the next day working with additional service providers at the Support Center. The couple's children, 13, 9, 7 and twin 4-year-olds, are enrolled in school, and Wazhma said they are adapting well amidst so much change. Mohammad is determined to create a new life for his family in America, providing stability and security for their future.

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[USCIS](#) staff met with more than 200 Afghans in Pittsburgh, reviewing cases, discussing work permit extensions and providing counsel on a variety of urgent questions. The team stressed the government is working overtime to help those with expiring statuses and providing the necessary documentation for employers and other entities.

The team was also able to provide advice to an asylum seeker who could not make it to the Sacramento event and had questions about his application and employment authorization. With the help of an interpreter, acting supervisor **Karmen Golla** connected with this individual via FaceTime and had a lengthy discussion about his case. Senior Immigration Services Officer **Sarah Siverd** answered his questions about re-parole and put in a referral for his local office to review the case. During the conversation, USCIS also learned his brother is a guardian to a 16-year-old boy and answered his questions about his asylum case.

Karmen, Sarah and **Ruhee Vagle** also assisted a guest who needed assistance with biometrics. USCIS could see the error with his file and use their mobile equipment to retake his biometrics onsite.

[University of Pittsburgh English Language Institute](#) has helped more than 14,000 students from 130 countries improve their English since its beginning in 1964. One of the oldest programs of its kind in the U.S., the Institute serves matriculated students at the University. Through its non-credit and community programs, it also serves new immigrants in Pittsburgh, including the Afghan community and internationals coming to Pittsburgh to achieve their career and personal goals through English.

In the Institute's Intensive English Program, full-time students spend 20 hours a week in classes on campus. The intensive, immersive experience allows their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills to develop in sync. Outside the classroom, students practice their English in weekly social and cultural activities, as well as in weekly meetings with conversation partners and discussion groups led by Pitt students. Through these activities, students benefit from the English practice, while Pitt students benefit from the cultural exchange and relationships they develop.

The Institute also offers a low-cost Community Conversation Course, where learners focus on improving their speaking and listening skills. The program helps encourage community building and gives participants language skills they can use in life and work or to prepare for new opportunities. The University's presence at the Support Center was valuable as 53 percent of attendees said English, including ESL, was a priority.



[Bethany Christian Services](#) has a resettlement agency team focused on supporting Afghan evacuees. They provide educational workshops teaching basic skills, including budget management, negotiating and cultural transitions. The team also offers a holistic health management program to Afghans who have experienced trauma, pain and loss. Mental health is not an easy topic to broach, so counselors start by asking clients about stressors they are experiencing. The transition to a new life can be hard for many, from finding employment to paying rent and raising children.

During their work in Pittsburgh, **Caley Donovan** helped a client named Tamean. After an address change, he lost track of his case and medical benefits. With their help, he reapplied for Medicaid benefits and found a primary care provider. Tamean also spoke with **USCIS** and received an update on his immigration case. The information allowed him to qualify for an official interview with Amazon, which he was able to schedule within a week. Before leaving the Support Center, Tamean said, "I believe in this system and feel safe in America. I have been able to graduate from high school and I am staying focused on my goals. I love cars and want to eventually be a mechanic."