

## ***Music and Cookouts in a Tent City for Afghans Starting Life in the U.S.***

On a military base in New Jersey, 8,500 people who fled their country as it fell to the Taliban await the next step in their journey.



By Tracey Tully

Sept. 25, 2021

They call it Liberty Village, a tent city that grew almost overnight to have a population larger than half of the towns in New Jersey.

It fills an expansive field at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, a military installation in central New Jersey where about 8,500 Afghans displaced by the longest war in U.S. history are temporarily living.

The New Jersey base is one of eight in the United States where tens of thousands of Afghans who evacuated from Kabul in a frenzied rush last month are being housed as health and security screenings are completed and inoculations against various diseases take hold.

The new arrivals will eventually be moved to communities across the country in one of the largest American resettlement efforts in decades. About 3,000 are expected to find permanent homes in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

For now, most of them are simply waiting to take the next step in their odyssey.

The families at the base are living in enormous, air-conditioned tents that each can hold up to 1,000 people, said Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey, who recently toured the base with Senator Cory Booker, his fellow Democrat from the state.

Mr. Menendez, the chairman of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, said the eventual goal was for about 250 people to move off the base a week.

Some evacuees may remain on the base and in limbo for up to a year, according to a military report that assessed everything from the expected increase in wastewater and generator usage there to how the population surge may affect a threatened bat species that lives in the area.

Aid organizations have been preparing for weeks to meet what they expect will be an extraordinary demand for apartment space, English language classes and job-placement services once the families begin to leave the base in larger numbers.

Welcome Home Jersey City, a nonprofit resettlement agency, has set up temporary lodging in a church rectory and is getting ready to move a family of six into a three-bedroom apartment next week. A local dentist volunteered to pay the family's rent for a year, said Alain Mentha, the director of Welcome Home, which is based in Jersey City.

Mr. Mentha's group is also planning for the arrival of another family in early October.

"This trickle," he said, "is going to start turning into a steady stream of need."

The vast military base southeast of Trenton has experience welcoming refugees. In 1999, about 4,000 former residents of Kosovo took shelter there after fleeing fighting in the Balkans.

Scott Timberman, the mayor of Wrightstown, a small borough at one end of the base, which stretches 20 miles from west to east, said there were no outward signs that a major resettlement effort was underway next door.

“We haven’t heard a thing — haven’t seen them,” Mr. Timberman said about the base’s new residents. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Sikandar Khan, the director of Global Emergency Response and Assistance, a nonprofit in Paterson, has been delivering supplies and providing entertainment to the Afghans on the base.

Sikandar Khan, 29, leads a refugee aid group that held a dance party at the base for its temporary residents. “It’s part of the morale-boosting campaign,” he said. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

Town hall-style meetings are held regularly at the camp, which has been divided into three villages. Each village has its own assigned mayor and deputy mayor, said Mr. Khan, who said he had spent a year working as a private contractor assisting U.S. Special Forces in southern Afghanistan and is fluent in Pashto.

Last Sunday, he said, his all-volunteer aid group held a five-hour dance party at the base with a D.J. who played music in English, Dari and Pashto. On Friday evening, the group held an outdoor barbecue for 10,000 Afghans and military officials replete with 6,000 pounds of grilled lamb, beef and chicken.

---

**Sign up for the New York Today Newsletter** Each morning, get the latest on New York businesses, arts, sports, dining, style and more. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

---

---

**Updates on Afghanistan** Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

---

“It’s part of the morale-boosting campaign of ours,” Mr. Khan said. “Play music. Let them smell the food.”

“These are folks who went through quite a journey to get here,” he added of the Afghans, many of whom helped the United States during the war and were evacuated as the Taliban took control of their country, just before American troops left before an Aug. 31 deadline set by President Biden.

Journalists have not been allowed onto the base. But workers with several nongovernmental aid agencies have been there daily. New Jersey’s health and military affairs departments have also been providing support as part of a task force established by Gov. Philip D. Murphy.

Children spend their time playing soccer or volleyball and doing crafts, visitors said. Some adults participate in language lessons. One tent serves as a mosque, with sections for men and women to worship separately.

### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

---

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

“What I got as I was walking around was a sense of gratitude,” Mr. Menendez said.

Three resettlement agencies will be responsible for working with smaller community organizations to find permanent homes in New Jersey for roughly 535 people, aides to Mr. Murphy said.

“By and large, we’ve had nothing but an outpouring of real support,” said Avigail Ziv, the executive director for New York and New Jersey at one of the resettlement agencies, the International Rescue Committee. Interfaith RISE in Highland Park and Church World Service in Jersey City will also help to resettle the newly arrived Afghans.

Donations of clothing and diapers and offers of translation services have flooded in. An intake form created to manage the overwhelming level of interest expressed by would-be volunteers says that donations to the base are “at capacity” and that no more can be accepted.

But the need for specific goods remains. Mr. Khan said he had recently been asked for suitcases and blankets as well as five barber’s chairs to accommodate the thousands of people getting hair cuts. Gift cards that can be used to buy cigarettes on the base are coveted, he added, because many of the men there now are addicted to nicotine.

Finding suitable and affordable housing for people without jobs or extensive documentation is perhaps the biggest looming challenge, several resettlement officials said.

“We can’t do this alone,” Ms. Ziv said. “We really need community support.”

Jahed Ahmad, center, at a mosque in Paterson, where he joked with volunteers as they prepared a meat marinade to be used for the Friday night barbecue. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

The affordable housing market is already severely limited, and competition for apartments among renters displaced during the pandemic — as well as those in need of temporary lodging after a deadly Sept. 1 storm flooded the region — is steep.

J. Christian Bollwage, the mayor of Elizabeth, a large and diverse city where the International Rescue Committee has offices, asked the group not to resettle Afghans there because officials were still seeking housing for 400 residents who had to evacuate after Hurricane Ida hit.

“Though we would like to welcome them,” Mr. Bollwage wrote on Twitter, “now is not the best choice.”

Liesa Watson and her husband, Nader Rezai, own a two-family rental property near Journal Square in Jersey City. When Ms. Watson heard about the Afghans arriving at the military base, she told Welcome Home that she had a three-bedroom unit available and would be willing to lease it at slightly less than market rate.

Her husband, a realtor, arrived in the United States from Iran as a child, and she said the couple was sympathetic to the struggle of new immigrants.

“I see something I can do something about,” she said. “I figured, ‘Let me put my toe in the water.’”

The Afghan family moving into the apartment has four children ages 5 to 14, all of whom speak English. They arrived in the United States on Aug. 23 after a weeklong journey that took them through Bahrain and Bulgaria, according to the children’s 37-year-old father, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of concern for the safety of relatives still living in Kabul, Afghanistan’s capital.

He is a banker who said he had worked indirectly with U.S. agencies; his wife is a schoolteacher. They are eager, he said, to get the clearance they need to start looking for permanent work.

“There will clearly be open doors for many of these newcomers,” Mr. Menendez said.