


# HEAR Project: Afghan Refugee Resettlement Experiences

## Maryam’s Story

| Maryam  | Fast Facts  |
|---|---|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Name (pseudonym*): Maryam</li><li>• Age: 51</li><li>• Arrival date: August 2021</li><li>• Family structure: Lives with her adult son and three grandchildren (ages 10, 12, and 14)</li><li>• Education: 10th grade</li><li>• Languages spoken: Dari, some English</li></ul> |

*“My son goes to work and I go to school Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. I have a really good experience here. We are laughing and smiling here. The only concern is financial difficulty. Also, my health condition. I’m just hoping and praying to get treated and get healthy so I can keep myself busy as well like others. The only issue is the financial difficulty.”*

### Prearrival

In Afghanistan, Maryam had no formal work experience. She finished 10th grade in Afghanistan and had limited education opportunities due to ongoing relocation to escape the war. Maryam’s husband passed away, but he worked in construction.

*“Due to the war in Afghanistan, I wasn’t able to get proper education. I couldn’t get it. We were traveling to one province and then another one. I didn’t get a chance to get education, due to the war I couldn’t continue. If I collect all the places I’ve been getting education, I have a 10th grade education. My education is very limited. I know basic stuff but not that much. I wasn’t able to get sufficient education. It’s been 2 years that I’ve been here and I’ve learned a little bit of the English language, but not that much. I am studying.”*

Maryam’s six adult children live in different places since the evacuation. One son lives with her in the United States. He previously worked as a military officer in Kabul. He was involved in a car accident and

\*This image is an illustration and does not reflect actual study participants

broke his lower back, and he was unable to continue working in Afghanistan. When the family was evacuating, the Taliban was searching homes and took his old uniform and documentation related to his disability. Maryam's other son worked at a nongovernmental organization (NGO), but he left his job and fled to Italy because there were threats of suicide bombs targeting the NGO where he worked; this son has since moved to Turkey. Two of Maryam's daughters were evacuated to the United States: one daughter lives in California, and one lives in Virginia. She also has two daughters who still live in Afghanistan.

*"Unfortunately, I have a one year parolee visa and it will end in two months. I have a lack of language skills and lack of financial capacity to hire a lawyer for me to help me to apply for asylum. If no one helps me, I will not know my future."*

### Arrival Experience

Maryam came to the United States with an adult son and her three grandchildren, but the children's parents—Maryam's daughter and son-in-law—are still in Afghanistan. The group went to the airport together to evacuate, but because of crowding and confusion, they were separated and the children's parents were unable to come to the United States. Now, Maryam is the primary caregiver for her grandchildren. Because of the unexpected nature of her caretaking role, she is anxious about the future. Maryam explains, *"My grandsons' parents couldn't make it here from their country. I technically adopted them, so I'm worried about the future, and I hope the government will help us."*

When Maryam and her family fled Afghanistan, they first went to Qatar, then they came to the United States. Upon arrival, Maryam and her family lived on a military base for about 2 1/2 months, then they moved to Washington, D.C., where they stayed in a hotel for 10 days. To provide a more permanent living arrangement, a resettlement agency helped Maryam and her family find an apartment in Maryland.

*"Sometimes the kids are a bit uneasy because they are away from their parents. I tell them they're going to be OK and they will be with their parents again. I try to keep them going. It is up and down, good and bad."*

The resettlement agency helped them in their first week in their apartment by bringing clothes and furniture. Her grandchildren—ages 10, 12, and 14—enrolled in school with the support of a case worker at the resettlement agency. The resettlement agency also provided rental assistance, and her family was enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to buy food and the Medicaid program to support anticipated health needs. Regarding their family's health needs, Maryam has heart disease, and her son experiences chronic pain due to his back injury and struggles to find steady employment. They are figuring out how to navigate the U.S. healthcare system.

Maryam and her son have work permits, but she needs a lawyer to help her submit documentation for asylum. In terms of social connections, there is a mosque nearby, but because Maryam does not have a car and has not learned public transportation routes yet, she is unable to get there. To stay in touch with family, she talks to her daughter in Afghanistan and stays connected with extended family who live in Virginia.

## **1 Year in the United States**

Maryam and her son are both unemployed due to chronic health problems. Also, they both care for the children in the home. To pay for household expenses, Maryam receives \$300 per month in support from SNAP. Initially, they had difficulty enrolling the children in SNAP, but the problem was resolved and the children were enrolled. Their rent is currently \$1,400 a month. Although the resettlement agency provided rental assistance for 6 months, that support ended, and Maryam worries that they will have to move to Virginia to live with relatives if they don't receive additional financial support. The family also was receiving monthly cash assistance from the resettlement agency of \$1,000 for their first 3 months; however, this support was discontinued, making it difficult to pay for household expenses. They applied for additional cash assistance, which would be an \$800 one-time payment, but the family is still waiting to hear if their application was approved.

Maryam and her son currently have a humanitarian parolee visa, Social Security card, and work permit, but she would like to apply for permanent residency through the asylum process. The resettlement agency said they could connect Maryam with a lawyer to help with her asylum application, but she is still waiting to hear back from them.

Because they spoke very little English when they first arrived in the United States, Maryam and her son have been learning English through an online course. This has been a challenge for Maryam as she is still not accustomed to using technology. She did learn about a private English class that she could take for 1 hour per week, and she wonders if this would be a better option for her.

Maryam's grandchildren have struggled with being separated from their parents, so she tries her best to be emotionally supportive. Maryam doesn't see her daughter in Virginia much, but her other daughter recently visited from California. To stay connected with her relatives in Afghanistan, Maryam talks with them on the phone. Otherwise, Maryam has limited social connections in the United States. Sometimes, she goes to a philanthropic community medical daycare to get COVID-19 tests or routine checks of her vital signs, as needed. She would like to get dental care, but she's unable to find a provider that accepts Medicaid.

## **18 months in the United States**

Maryam has been experiencing chronic pain in her left arm, hypertension, and thyroid problems. Stress related to financial concerns over their ability to pay rent also contributes to her health problems. In addition, she struggles with memory problems, making it difficult for her to remember her doctor's advice. *"That's the problem for me,"* Maryam explains. *"My memory is not good. I take medication and*

*then I forget if I take it. My son has told me to stop taking my medication; he will give it to me so he can make sure I take it and not double the dose. My son gives me my medication, I do not take it myself.”*

Because Maryam is not able to work, the family struggles to pay rent. They are now receiving notices from the apartment management threatening to evict them as their rent is past due. The resettlement agency paid an additional 5 months of rent, which saved Maryam and her family from eviction. Following this support, the agency transferred rent responsibility to Maryam and her family. To make ends meet, her son began working the night shift a few days a week at a nearby store. This is the most he can work due to chronic back pain.

Despite long wait times and frequent staff turnover at the resettlement agency, Maryam contacts the agency frequently to ask about how to get connected with a lawyer. She explains that she cannot afford to hire her own lawyer and cannot speak English to communicate with them. Eventually, she and her family are assigned a lawyer. *“I was asking every month about our asylum because others were applying and I wanted to apply as well,”* Maryam explains. *“They put my name in the system and then finally a couple months ago they assigned me a lawyer.”* Although her application was submitted, Maryam is unsure about the status of her asylum application and anxious because her parolee visa will expire after 2 years. Each time she contacts the resettlement agency for a status update, she is told to wait.

To exercise, socialize, and learn English, most days Maryam goes to a free community medical daycare. She also continues taking online English classes. Regarding Maryam’s health, she has learned how to get to her doctor’s appointments and uses an interpreter to communicate with her primary care provider. *“Most of the time,”* she says, *“I’m not good compared to the time I am feeling good. My grandchildren and my children—they know their own duties. They are able to do their own chores and put on their clothes and go to school. The house chores are done by my son. He comes home from work and will do the chores. Sometimes he cooks. When he’s not here, he texts me to ask how I’m doing. He checks up on me. Sometimes I’m good and then the next moment I’m dizzy. I think it’s my blood pressure.”*

*“[When I arrived], a lot of things were difficult for me. For example I was not able to understand any American words. If an American person was talking I couldn’t understand anything. But now I am understanding a little a bit... I remember last year I was not able to understand a word in English. But now I’m starting and I’m learning little by little and it makes our life easier and easier.”*

*“The family is good, thank God. But I am not fine; I’m having health issues. My problem has gotten worse. On my left arm I’m experiencing pain. I was seen by a medical provider and they said I have to do exercise. I’m have thyroid problems, I have hypertension. Generally my health is not good. I’m not feeling good. I’m not feeling healthy. Day by day I’m struggling and I’m getting worse. I’ve developed memory problems. I don’t feel good at all, I’m feeling worse. I’ve gone to medical providers but I’m not feeling any improvements.”*

## 2 years in the United States

Maryam is feeling unwell as financial instability and uncertainty about housing stability are ongoing worries, especially after receiving multiple notices from her landlord. Maryam's son lost his job, causing additional financial strain and stress.

Regarding their documentation status, Maryam and her son are waiting for their asylum interview to be scheduled, and she is concerned that her legal documents will not arrive in time for her to renew her Medicaid coverage. She is satisfied with the lawyer because the lawyer asks questions and meets with Maryam often. Although her ability to read and write in English is limited, Maryam's spoken English has improved and, over time, she is learning how to navigate U.S. systems, ask questions, and visit specific organizations when she needs additional support.

## Policy and Program Implications

- A longer time frame for early resettlement support (such as rent, utilities, and basic living expenses) from organizations
- Partnerships with landlords to prevent eviction when refugees face financial insecurity
- Cultural integration activities (such as English classes, the [Life Skills curriculum](#) for English learners, or American cultural guides to orient refugees to U.S. systems and social norms)
- Written guides outlining processes for refugees' eligibility, application, and renewal for social services programs, such as Medicaid and SNAP
- Connection to professional development opportunities that transition new arrivals with disabilities to U.S. employment (for example, skills training, the [Job Accommodation Network](#), workforce development transition programs, or course certificates)
- [Job training](#), which includes identifying transferable skills and a description of the kinds of jobs that refugees can apply for
- Culturally competent health services and/or community health workers to provide outreach in refugee communities
- Timely access to legal services to support required updates in documentation status

### Suggested Citation

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# Maryam's Resettlement Experience



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- **Name (pseudonym\*):** Maryam
- **Age:** 51
- **Arrival date:** August 2021
- **Household composition:** Lives with her adult son and three grandchildren
- **Education:** 10th grade
- **Languages spoken:** Dari, some English

*“Sometimes the kids are a bit uneasy because they are away from their parents. I tell them they’re going to be OK and they will be with their parents again. I try to keep them going. It is up and down, good and bad.”*


|  | PRE-ARRIVAL   | ARRIVAL   | 1 YEAR   | 18 MONTHS   | 2 YEARS  |
|--|---|---|--|---|--|
| <b>Health and Health Care</b><br>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam has chronic heart disease.</li> <li>• Her son has chronic pain due to a back injury.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam and her family are enrolled in Medicaid to cover anticipated medical expenses. </li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes, Maryam goes to an adult medical daycare center to get COVID-19 tests or routine checks of her vital signs, as needed.</li> <li>• She would like to get dental care, but she is unable to find a provider that accepts Medicaid.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam has chronic pain in her left arm, hypertension, and thyroid problems.</li> <li>• Stress related to financial concerns contributes to her health problems.</li> <li>• Maryam also has memory problems, making it difficult for her to remember her doctor's advice.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam is feeling stressed and unwell as financial instability and uncertainty about housing are ongoing worries.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Social Services</b><br>                 |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam and her family use Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to buy food.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The resettlement agency provided rental assistance for 1 year, but this support has ended.</li> <li>• Maryam worries that they will have to move to Virginia to live with relatives if they do not receive additional financial support.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam has received multiple notices from her landlord that she is behind on rent.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam's case manager helped pay rent on a month-to-month basis, but this support has ended.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Legal Status</b><br>                    |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam needs a lawyer to help her family apply for asylum. </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The resettlement agency connected Maryam with a lawyer to help with her asylum application, but she is still waiting to hear back from them.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam's parolee status will expire soon and she is unsure about the status of her asylum application.</li> <li>• She is still waiting to get connected with a lawyer.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite long wait times and frequent staff turnover at the resettlement agency, Maryam is connected with a lawyer.</li> <li>• Maryam and her son are waiting for their asylum interview to be scheduled.</li> </ul>     |
| <b>Community Integration</b><br>           |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam's grandchildren are separated from their parents. Their parents remain in Afghanistan.</li> <li>• Maryam becomes the primary caregiver for her grandchildren in the United States.</li> <li>• There is a mosque nearby, but Maryam is not sure how to get there.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam and her son have been learning English through an online course, which has been a challenge for Maryam as she is still not accustomed to using technology. </li> <li>• Maryam's grandchildren struggle with being separated from their parents, so she tries her best to be emotionally supportive.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam continues to attend the medical daycare to exercise, socialize, and learn English.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although Maryam's ability to read and write in English is limited, her spoken English has improved.</li> <li>• She is learning to navigate U.S. systems and ask questions when she needs additional support.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Employment</b><br>                      |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam and her son are both unemployed. </li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam and her son remain unemployed.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam's son begins working the night shift a few days a week at a nearby store.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryam's son loses his job. </li> </ul>   |
| <b>Policy and Program Implications</b><br> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A longer time frame for early resettlement support (rent, utilities, and basic living expenses) from organizations</li> <li>• Partnerships with landlords to prevent eviction when refugees face financial insecurity</li> <li>• Cultural integration activities (for example, English classes, the <a href="#">Life Skills curriculum</a> for English learners, or American cultural guides to orient refugees to U.S. systems and social norms)</li> <li>• Written guides outlining processes for refugees' eligibility, application, and renewal for social services programs, such as Medicaid and SNAP</li> <li>• Connection to professional development opportunities that transition new arrivals with disabilities to U.S. employment (for example, skills training, the <a href="#">Job Accommodation Network</a>, workforce development transition programs, or course certificates)</li> <li>• Job training, which includes identifying transferable skills and a description of the kinds of jobs that refugees can apply for</li> <li>• Culturally competent health services and/or community health workers to provide outreach in refugee communities</li> <li>• Timely access to legal services to support required updates in documentation status</li> </ul> |   |  |   |  |

For more information about the **HEAR Project**, visit [air.org/hearproject](https://air.org/hearproject) | \*This image is an illustration and does not reflect actual study participants.



# HEAR Project: Afghan Refugee Resettlement Experiences

## Nasima's Story

| Nasima  | Fast Facts   |
|---|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Name (pseudonym*): Nasima</li><li>• Age: 33</li><li>• U.S. arrival date: August 2021</li><li>• Household composition: Husband and 3 children (ages 3, 5, and 8)</li><li>• Education: Trained as midwife in Afghanistan; working as medical assistant in the United States</li><li>• Languages spoken: Dari, with increased English proficiency in the United States.</li></ul> |

*"I wake up early, pray, get my children ready for school and make them breakfast. I drop my older children off at school and take my younger son to daycare. I get to work around 9am and leave to pick up the children at 5:30. My husband and I make dinner together and we spend time with the children. I try to learn something from Google."*

### Prearrival

Before Nasima's arrival to the United States in August 2021, she lived in Afghanistan in a home with her extended family. Her husband shared ownership of a chicken farm with his friend, and they had a successful business. Nasima's sister-in-law stayed home to cook and care for their families. For a while, Nasima worked as a midwife at a large hospital in Afghanistan. She enjoyed her job, but when the Taliban arrived in their country, it was no longer safe for her to work.

Nasima had lots of close friends and was friendly with the people in her neighborhood. One of her neighbors would visit often and bring her baby to play with Nasima's children. They would chat and drink tea together to pass the time.

*"I didn't think that one day we'd come to the US. When the Taliban came, everyone was just leaving the country. My older sister didn't have a car, so my husband dropped her off at the airport. When we brought her to the airport, we just left too. We didn't bring anything. When we left my child didn't even have shoes."*

\*This image is an illustration and does not reflect actual study participants

## Arrival Experience

When Nasima and her family evacuated to the United States, she was separated from her husband who was placed at a different military base. She and her three children were placed at a military camp in Wisconsin for 5 months before arriving in Maryland to reunite with her husband. Her family was temporarily placed in a hotel, and their stay was funded by a resettlement agency. Nasima enrolled in a cooking class through a local university where she worked hard to learn English and gain skills that could help her find employment. Nasima quickly made friends with other refugees who were staying at the hotel and by connecting with people in her cooking class.

The resettlement agency helped the family enroll in Medicaid and found an apartment for Nasima and her family to move into, but it was too far from her cooking class.

Because the cooking class was essential for her to secure employment, her friends helped her find an apartment that was closer to the class and more affordable. She secured a lease for the apartment, and the agency helped with rent payments for 3 months. However, she was told they would help for 6 months. To support their move, a community-based organization provided their family with toys, clothes, and bicycles for the children.

*“If I wasn’t brave and doing everything for myself, I would not be in a good place. I keep moving and talking to people. If I wait for them (resettlement agency) nothing will get done.”*

At the resettlement agency, Nasima and her husband had two different cases open as they were separated upon arrival, and they had trouble getting their cases linked. They repeatedly reminded their caseworkers to link their cases, and after a year, the change was made. Nasima explains that her biggest challenge is finding a lawyer to apply for asylum. She says, *“if we don’t find a lawyer and the deadline set for us passes, I don’t know what will happen to us.”* She tries to contact people to find a lawyer through her social networks, but she is unsuccessful.

Nasima made fast friends in the United States, and they have been helpful in her resettlement experience. She says, *“When I talk to everyone the first time, they say ‘if you want something or if you need help please call me.’ They give their number to me. Now I have a lot of friends. When I don’t know anything, I call them and they help me.”* Because her family did not speak English, one friend came to her home to teach her and her husband English in his free time. Every Sunday, he came to their home to do an English lesson, and they cooked Afghan food for him.

## 1 Year in the United States

Support for social services has been inconsistent for Nasima and her family. After 3 months, the resettlement agency stopped providing rental support, but they did connect her with a free lawyer to help her family apply for asylum. Although she was able to enroll in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), her family’s SNAP benefits were interrupted for about 3 months. Her caseworker at the resettlement agency advised her to apply for SNAP benefits again, but she is not sure when she will be approved. *“I tried to solve my own problems to get familiar with the system,”*



Nasima explains. It was difficult to have SNAP benefits interrupted, but because she and her husband are both employed, they can buy food for their family even though money is tight.

Nasima's apartment is becoming too expensive for them to afford as they wait for support from SNAP, and they will need to move once the lease ends. She is concerned that the children will need to switch schools if they relocate. Despite their challenges, Nasima says her family has everything they need except a car. If her family needs something, Nasima tries to find it herself. *"One month ago,"* Nasima explains, *"I needed a Chromebook for my older daughter to use YouTube for English. I had an English teacher and she helped me get a Chromebook for my daughter."*

In terms of health needs, for routine care, Nasima's family is seen by doctors at a local medical clinic that supports refugees. She also is able to get the medicine they need if the children get sick. Nasima would like to get a form of birth control, but she has not found a doctor to provide that care. She and her family also need to see a dentist, but they have not found one that accepts Medicaid.

*"Last year didn't have a home, furniture, or job. Now we have everything. We're working harder and day by day our lives become better."*

Nasima says it is essential that she and her husband get their driver's licenses and a car so that they have their own transportation. Nasima's husband leaves home at 5 a.m. to carpool to work at a warehouse. She gets her two older children ready for school and sends them off. At 2:30 p.m., she takes the train to her job at the university where she now works as a cook's assistant. Because her husband is not home yet before she leaves for work, her youngest child is often left with a neighbor for an hour until her husband comes home from work.

Nasima and her family are finding their place in their new community. Her husband has made friends at work, and her children love school. She explains, *"My older daughter was sick, and I told her she had to go to doctor, and she said, 'no mom I want to go to school,' they love school. They have Afghan and American friends."* Nasima also has made a lot of Afghan friends in the building where she lives. Her building has 20 floors, and there are about 50–60 Afghan families who live there. She also became good friends with an older Chinese couple in her building. *"They say, 'we want to try and help you because you are young,'"* Nasima explains. *"I say, 'no, I'm young, I try to help you.' They love me and also I love them because they are very kind."* Nasima also has met people from different countries while volunteering to feed elderly families at a local community organization every Sunday. She relies on these friendships when she doesn't understand something or needs support.

## **18 months in the United States**

The apartment lease is ending soon for Nasima's family, and they are still looking to move. Although her current apartment is more affordable than the last, there are mice in the building and sanitation is a concern. Furthermore, Nasima laments that building management does not respond to their

maintenance requests and often charges them unexpected fees. They hope to move when the current lease ends.

Nasima is still learning to navigate the U.S. healthcare system. She tried to get an IUD at the local medical center that supports refugees, but the center does not provide reproductive care. So, she called a nonprofit healthcare organization that connects low-income families to federally qualified healthcare centers to make an appointment at a different center for her reproductive health needs. Her family is very healthy, but they are still in need of dental care, so a family doctor at the nonprofit health organization helped Nasima and her family find a dentist.

Nasima's daughter needs to get vaccines for school enrollment. Nasima called the nonprofit healthcare organization and was able to arrange an appointment for her daughter to get a check-up and her vaccines. When describing her experience making appointments and navigating the healthcare system, Nasima says, *"Speaking English makes this easier for me. When I go to the hospital they ask if I want an interpreter and I say, 'no, it's ok.'"* She goes on to explain that any time she does not understand a word, she will go home and look it up on Google or use Google Translate on her phone during the appointment.

Nasima is looking to get back into the healthcare field as she had similar professional training in Afghanistan. A friend at the mosque told her about an online class she can take to become a certified nursing assistant (CNA). The friend offered to pay for the class in return for Nasima continuing her volunteer service providing meals to the elderly every Sunday. *"You just learn, don't worry,"* her friend says. Upon completing the CNA class, Nasima enrolled in an in-person medical technician class.

*"In the future I want to be a doctor. Right now, I start with CNA. Once I finish that, I will find someone to help me find a nursing class. I don't want to work in a restaurant, I want to be a doctor. I'm working hard to save money and go to college."*

The lawyer who Nasima was connected with through the resettlement agency helped her and her family apply for asylum. She completed an interview for her asylum application, but hasn't received an update on the status. Soon, she and her husband must apply to renew their work permits to keep their current employment. However, their temporary visa expires in August. She says if they don't get accepted for asylum, she does not know what she will do.

Family life has settled into a rhythm that Nasima has carved out. Her daughter has started taking taekwondo classes and is progressing quickly. Her husband got his driver's license, and they were able to buy a car for him to use for work. He now works for rideshare companies, but his income is inconsistent. Nasima is working toward getting her license as well. She passed her written test and will have her road test soon. Once she gets her license, she wants to buy a car for herself. Always striving to learn new things, Nasima also is trying to learn Spanish as many Spanish speakers live in her community. Every night, she tries to learn a new Spanish word or sentence for 15 minutes.

## 2 years in the United States

Nasima's family moved to a new home that is close to her job and the children's school. Upon completing her CNA classes and certifications, she found a new job working as a medical assistant at the local medical clinic that supports refugees. When she was hired for this job, she was able to learn everything in a couple of days due to her prior training in Afghanistan. She also has been given opportunities for growth and career development. She says, *"I am very happy at work. It's easy to work as a colleague. It's close to my house and I like it—and it's related to my previous field in Afghanistan."*

Nasima received her driver's license, and she and her husband bought a second car. Now, her husband uses one car to work as a driver for rideshare services, and Nasima uses the other to get to work. Her case manager at the resettlement agency helped her apply for a voucher to cover childcare costs for her youngest child, so she could continue working and taking classes. The voucher will cover childcare expenses for 1 year. Nasima's application for SNAP benefits was approved for her three children. There is less money provided for their family than there used to be because the benefits do not include her or her husband. Still, the funds are a helpful addition to the family's resources. She says, *"Now everything is OK. We have everything: job, car, healthy family, everything. Things look good and I feel good. It is spring, and everywhere looks very beautiful."*

Regarding documentation and legal status, 7 months after their asylum interview, their case was accepted. Nasima would like to apply for citizenship so that she can travel to see her mother in Germany and her siblings in Australia. After 2 years in the United States, work permits for Nasima and her husband expired. She found her own lawyer to help her with this process. The lawyer told her the application for another work permit would cost \$400 for each work permit—one for her and one for her husband—and an additional \$150 for lawyer fees. She reached out to her caseworker at the resettlement agency and was connected with a free lawyer. She and her husband applied for work permits and did not have to pay anything. They received their work permits 2 weeks later and they are valid for 2 more years.

When reflecting on her time in the United States, Nasima says, *"The United States allows you to make yourself and make your life. If we can try, we can fly. Everything is possible in this country. You can learn everything, and you can do everything for yourself, for your family, for your people. Others will wait for someone to come and help them. Just do it, don't wait until someone comes to help you."* Nasima learns that she is pregnant with their fourth child. She worries that it will impact her ability to take classes to make progress toward her career goals, but she and her husband are excited to welcome another child into the family.

*“Usually when my friends in Afghanistan ask how it is here, I say—all the time we are busy here. We have work. We have no time to go to our friends’ home or to talk. In Afghanistan, we had free time. Here, all the time we are busy.*

*But here, if we try we can do anything. In our country, if we try, we cannot do anything. Everything was broken. Here, if you want to buy a house, you can. If you try, you can buy a car. Here, if we try, we can do everything.”*

## Policy and Program Implications

- Improved connections between government services and organizations supporting resettlement
- A longer time frame for early resettlement support from organizations
- Accommodations to offset the “benefits cliff” (ineligibility for benefits due to a slight increase in household income)
- Professional development opportunities to transition new arrivals to U.S. employment (for example, skills training, workforce development transition programs, or course certificates)
- Improved access to reproductive healthcare for women as needed
- Timely access to legal services to support required updates in documentation status
- Cultural integration activities (such as English classes or the [Life Skills curriculum](#) for English learners)
- Social support and community building with people from similar backgrounds

### Suggested Citation

DePatie, H., Childers, T., Ali, M., Ledesma, R., & Firminger, K. (2023). *HEAR project refugee resettlement experiences: Nasima’s story*. (Prepared for the AIR Equity Initiative.) American Institutes for Research. Available at [www.air.org/hearproject](http://www.air.org/hearproject).

# Nasima's Resettlement Experience



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- **Name (pseudonym\*):** Nasima
- **Age:** 33
- **Arrival date:** August 2021
- **Household composition:** Husband and three children (ages 3, 5, and 8)
- **Education:** Trained as a midwife in Afghanistan; working as a medical assistant in the United States
- **Languages spoken:** Dari, increased English proficiency in the United States


*"In the future I want to be a doctor. Right now, I start with CNA [certified nursing assistant]. Once I finish that, I will find someone to help me find a nursing class. I don't want to work in a restaurant, I want to be a doctor. I'm working hard to save money and go to college."*

|  | PRE-ARRIVAL  | ARRIVAL   | 1 YEAR   | 18 MONTHS   | 2 YEARS   |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Health and Health Care</b><br>          |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima and her family are enrolled in Medicaid to cover anticipated medical expenses. </li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima receives a dental insurance card.</li> <li>• Nasima would like to get birth control but has not found a doctor to provide reproductive care. </li> </ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima calls a healthcare organization to find a dentist and family doctor.</li> <li>• Nasima can speak enough English to make appointments on her own.</li> <li>• Nasima hopes to find a clinician that can give her an IUD.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima is healthy and discovers she is pregnant. She adjusts her lifestyle to welcome another child.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Social Services</b><br>                 |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima and her family use Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to buy food.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The resettlement agency provides rental assistance for 3 months after her family moves.</li> <li>• SNAP benefits are cut off. Her caseworker recommends that she reapply. </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima is looking to move out of their current apartment due to cost and sanitation concerns.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima's family has moved to a new home.</li> <li>• Her case manager helps her apply to receive a voucher to cover childcare expenses.</li> <li>• Nasima is reenrolled in the SNAP program for her three children.</li> </ul>              |
| <b>Legal Status</b><br>                    |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima has trouble finding a lawyer to help her family apply for asylum. She is worried that she will face legal problems if she does not apply on time. </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima's caseworker helps her find a lawyer to apply for asylum.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima has had an interview for her asylum application and is waiting for a status update.</li> <li>• Nasima and her husband's work permits will expire soon, and they need to reapply.</li> </ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seven months after their asylum interview, their case is accepted.</li> <li>• Nasima and her husband's work permits expired after 2 years in the United States. They reapply, and their new permits are valid for 2 more years.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Community Integration</b><br>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima was close with her neighbors and friends from college. She often shared meals with her neighbors.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the United States, Nasima quickly makes friends who support her resettlement. </li> <li>• Her friends help her find an apartment close to her new job.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima's children love school and are making friends.</li> <li>• Nasima has made many friends in her building and by volunteering to serve meals to seniors at her mosque.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima's husband receives his driver's license.</li> <li>• Nasima's daughter starts taking Taekwondo classes.</li> <li>• Nasima's friend at the mosque offers to pay for her CNA class.</li> </ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima receives her driver's license.</li> <li>• Nasima and her husband buy a second car.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Employment</b><br>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Afghanistan, Nasima worked as a midwife at a large hospital. </li> <li>• Her husband ran a chicken farming business.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima takes a cooking class at a local university where she also learns English. </li> <li>• The class helps her find a job as a cook.</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima continues to work as a cook.</li> <li>• Nasima's husband works at a warehouse.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima starts taking an online CNA course to get back into the healthcare field. </li> <li>• Nasima's husband works as a rideshare driver.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nasima completes her CNA class.</li> <li>• She finds a job working as a medical assistant.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Policy and Program Implications</b><br> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved connections between government services and organizations supporting resettlement</li> <li>• A longer time frame for early resettlement support from organizations</li> <li>• Accommodations to offset the "benefits cliff" (ineligibility for benefits due to a slight increase in household income)</li> <li>• Professional development opportunities to transition new arrivals to U.S. employment (for example, skills training, workforce development transition programs, or course certificates)</li> <li>• Improved access to reproductive health care for women as needed</li> <li>• Timely access to legal services to support required updates in documentation status</li> <li>• Cultural integration activities (such as English classes or the <a href="#">Life Skills curriculum</a> for English learners)</li> <li>• Social support and community building with people from similar backgrounds</li> </ul> |   |  |   |   |

For more information about the **HEAR Project**, visit [air.org/hearproject](https://air.org/hearproject) | \*This image is an illustration and does not reflect actual study participants.

# HEAR Project: Afghan Refugee Resettlement Experiences

## Ahmed's Story

| Ahmed   | Fast Facts   |
|---|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Name (pseudonym*): Ahmed</li><li>• Age: 42</li><li>• U.S. arrival: September 2021</li><li>• Family structure: Lives in the United States with his adult son; his wife and four younger kids are in Afghanistan</li><li>• Education: 8th grade</li><li>• Languages spoken: Pashto, Farsi, Italian</li></ul> |

*"I usually wake up and do my prayers and prepare for breakfast. I call friends and family on my phone. Then I go and meet my friend at the medical daycare. Then I come back, and I do nothing. I do not have a job so I have nothing to do. I would like to find a job that allows me to sit, because of my disability."*

### Prearrival

Ahmed came to the United States from Afghanistan in September 2021, along with his 21-year-old son. Before coming to the United States, Ahmed ran his own business in Afghanistan and worked with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) army for 10 years as a contractor for construction work. His construction business was thriving in Afghanistan, and this enabled him to employ many staff and own property. Ahmed primarily speaks Pushto, but also can communicate in Dari. He does not speak English, but can speak conversational Italian, which he picked up while working with NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Ahmed lost his leg when he was injured in a landmine blast in Afghanistan. Because of the accident, he now uses a prosthetic leg to help him walk short distances. But standing or walking for long periods of time can sometimes be challenging. Due to many threats to his life, Ahmed decided to leave Afghanistan along with his brother and his son.

*"In Afghanistan, I had my own business of building and construction. I'd build homes. I had staff. I was thriving there. So far, I have been unable to use that experience here. I have that experience in construction, but I didn't use it here."*

\*This image is an illustration and does not reflect actual study participants



Unfortunately, Ahmed could not bring his wife and four younger children who were left behind in Kabul due to large crowds at the airport. Because Ahmed was always the sole income earner for his family, he is concerned about his family's well-being back in Afghanistan.

## Arrival

When Ahmed and his son first arrived in the United States, they spent about 5 months on a military base – a period that was very stressful and lonely. His brother, who had accompanied them to the United States, went to Texas to join other family members there. Ahmed did not know anyone when he arrived in Maryland. His case manager at the resettlement agency helped him find an apartment, and he receives rental support and cash assistance for utility bills from the resettlement agency for several months. The case manager also helped Ahmed apply for Medicaid, find a doctor, and enroll in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to begin receiving food stamps.

When they first arrived, Ahmed's son wanted to go to college, but instead he decided to find a job to support the family. Ahmed would like to work, but he is having a hard time finding a job that matches his physical abilities. He is looking for work that he can do while sitting.

The loneliness and anxiety of being away from his wife and younger kids is a daily struggle for Ahmed. He began attending a free community medical daycare. The

medical daycare provides transportation to and from the facility. He enjoys going there regularly as it provides meals and social activities, which help him meet other Afghans. He also attends English classes at the facility. Regarding his legal status, when he arrived, Ahmed did not file his asylum application due to the cost, and he is hoping the resettlement agency can help him with that. He plans to apply for his wife and kids to join him in Maryland, once his asylum paperwork is approved.

*"My son and my brother helped me [leave Afghanistan]. I'm handicapped, so they helped me physically, to take me to the airport so I could get on the airplane. I worked in the NATO army for almost 10 years. When I came here, I thought it [getting asylum] would be a simple and short process, but it has been taking very long... I'm worried about my family back in Afghanistan. My children don't have anyone to take care of them. I'm missing them a lot here. I'm alone and they're without me."*

## 1 Year in the United States

Ahmed spends most days either at the medical daycare or at home. Other Afghans come to the center, and he plays billiards with them, shares meals, and exercises. Ahmed has made one friend at the medical daycare who he talks to regularly. Some of his neighbors also are from Afghanistan, but Ahmed does not interact with them very much. He explains that everybody works, and they don't have time to socialize. He also meets other Afghans when he goes to the mosque for Friday prayers. His son has made some friends but is mostly busy trying to earn a living and has limited time to spend at home.

Ahmed now has Medicaid insurance, and his caseworker helped him find a medical provider. Because he does not speak English, Ahmed's son and/or the caseworker help him make doctors' appointments.

He also asked his caseworker about finding an electric wheelchair to support his mobility, but he is not sure if they can help. Ahmed is having difficulty paying rent and household bills. The resettlement agency is no longer providing rental support. His son is working and pays the rent, but they are barely getting by. Ahmed also is finding it difficult to buy food. The SNAP allowance is just enough for buying basic supplies, and Afghan food and groceries are not easy to find near his home. Ahmed would love to get a job, but does not know how to find a job that he can do with the appropriate accommodations for his physical abilities. His caseworker helped him apply for disability benefits through the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program 6 months ago, but he is still waiting for a status update.

Ahmed explains that there are very few stores where he lives, and he wishes he could live in a neighborhood with greater access to stores and parks. Not knowing English makes it difficult for him to communicate with others, and he depends on his son or the caseworker for interpretation when he needs to communicate or go out. Although the resettlement agency has helped him settle in, it's often difficult to reach his caseworker over the phone. The agency is far away from where he lives, and although he would like to go there for support and services, he doesn't have transportation.

Ahmed did receive financial support from the resettlement agency to apply for asylum, and he is relieved. After 10 months in the United States, Ahmed found a lawyer with the help of his caseworker and was able to submit his application for asylum. Compiling the paperwork and submitting necessary documentation were challenging, but Ahmed is now looking forward to the asylum interview.

*"I don't have any family here. I call them [in Afghanistan] and share everything with them. I have one friend here that I talk to. My son goes to school and then he works. He's with me at home but he lives his own life and I live mine. There are more people at the medical daycare. I socialize with them. We play billiards and we eat, and do exercises. Being away from the family is not fun. Half of the family is there, and half is here. We are not together. It is not good. Once we are together it will be OK, but not now."*

Ahmed misses his wife and children who are still in Afghanistan. He also is stressed because his son was recently in a car accident. Thankfully, Ahmed's son is safe; however, his car was damaged. Because they do not have car insurance, the total cost of repairs is almost \$15,000, and they cannot afford to get the car fixed. Ahmed is hoping that his son can get a better job and more income to help them through their financial challenges—especially as they also are supporting their family back in Afghanistan. His children in Afghanistan know English, and he hopes that when they come here they can help him learn and communicate in English.

## **18 months in the United States**

Ahmed is getting more familiar with navigating the healthcare system. He is looking for a doctor to examine his hand. Some shrapnel from his past landmine injury still remains lodged in his hand, making it painful to use his hand. It's challenging for Ahmed to make doctors' appointments and he often has

to wait a long time before he can get one. At the doctor's office, the doctor communicates with him through a Pushto interpreter. Ahmed is satisfied with the care he is receiving, and he is able to understand his provider's care instructions. Medicaid covers doctors' visits, but sometimes does not cover his medication. Transportation to and from visits also is a challenge, and he often asks his friends for a ride or uses rideshare services.

Ahmed still experiences depression and anxiety when he thinks about his wife and kids back in Afghanistan. In low moments, Ahmed prays, and feels comforted and empowered. He feels that his depression and anxiety are getting better. He also is open to speaking with a therapist or counselor to support his mental health. The family's financial challenges add to his anxiety as he continues to look for a job. Getting an electric wheelchair would help him with mobility and perhaps make it easier to find a job. His caseworker has provided him with a letter affirming his disability and the need for a wheelchair. However, he does not know how to submit this letter or to whom.

*"I'm trying my best (to learn English) but it's not helping. Mentally I am not here. I'm not able to learn, maybe because I'm depressed. It's hard to learn. When people are speaking, I can sometimes follow."*

Ahmed completed his first interview for the asylum application. The resettlement agency provided a lawyer to support his application and his preparation for the interview. He is still waiting for an update on his SSI application, which would help supplement their income to help pay rent and bills. Looking ahead, he would like to have an income and find a job. Ahmed continues to attend the adult medical daycare where he receives meals and socializes with other Afghans. At home, he spends time cooking, watching TV, or speaking to his family back in Afghanistan. Reflecting on his time in the United States thus far, Ahmed feels safe but lonely. He visited Texas to see his nephew who had a stroke. Ahmed is worried about him. When thinking about life in the United States, he says that the systems in America are good, and people follow the law, but Ahmed admits that he is not mentally well because he misses his family back in Afghanistan.

## 2 years in the United States

Ahmed received his work authorization permit, which is approved for the next 2 years. Unfortunately, he is still unemployed and unsure about the kinds of jobs he could do. Ahmed is using a cane to support himself when walking, and someone donated a walker that he also uses. He is still waiting to see if the agency can help him get an electric wheelchair. Ahmed also has hand surgery scheduled, which will be covered by Medicaid.

Ahmed is still awaiting the results of his asylum application and SSI application. Even though the legal process has taken a long time, Ahmed feels fortunate. He feels grateful for his caseworker, who has helped him at every step. She continues to be responsive to his concerns and often provides him with helpful information. Even though he is still missing his wife and children in Afghanistan, he is feeling better and less depressed. He is hopeful that he can apply for them to join him once his asylum is approved. Ahmed feels that he is more independent and has learned how to meet basic needs on his

own, such as getting groceries or withdrawing money from the bank—things that were new to him when he first arrived. He continues to attend the medical daycare, which has become an important part of his daily routine. As Ahmed looks ahead to the future, he hopes that he will be able to provide for his family and help them out of their current financial difficulty.

*“I’ve learned a lot about making [doctors’] appointments. Back home, we would go to the doctors without any appointment and things would be done. Here, you need to call and the time to get an appointment can be long. I’ve also learned that here, you go to stores yourself. You walk around yourself and get the things you want and then you go to the front to pay. I learned at the bank you insert your card, enter your pin and then you can get your money. I’m grateful to my caseworker and friends who helped me learn. Whenever I have a question or have to do something, I share it with my caseworker. She would find a way for me. And I would ask my friends and they would help me find a way.”*

## Policy and Program Implications

- Co-locating essential services provided by community-based organizations, such as transportation, meals, language training, and social supports, to help with community integration
- Culturally competent mental health services to address depression and anxiety
- Connection to professional development opportunities that transition new arrivals with disabilities to U.S. employment (for example, skills training, the [Job Accommodation Network](#), workforce development transition programs, or course certificates)
- [Job training](#), which includes identifying transferable skills and a description of the kinds of jobs refugees can apply for
- Timely access to legal services to support required updates in documentation status and support helping families reunite
- Cultural integration activities (such as English classes or the [Life Skills curriculum](#) for English learners)
- Social support and community building with people from similar backgrounds

### Suggested Citation

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# Ahmed's Resettlement Experience



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- **Name (pseudonym)\*:** Ahmed
- **Age:** 42
- **Arrival date:** September 2021
- **Household composition:** Lives in the United States with his adult son; his wife and four younger children are in Afghanistan
- **Education:** 8th grade
- **Languages spoken:** Pashto, Farsi, Italian


*"I don't have any family here. I call them [in Afghanistan] and share everything with them. I have one friend here that I talk to. My son goes to school and then he works. He's with me at home but he lives his own life and I live mine. There are more people at the medical daycare. I socialize with them. We play billiards and we eat and do exercises. Being away from the family is not fun. Half of the family is there, and half is here. We are not together. It is not good. Once we are together it will be OK, but not now."*

|  | PRE-ARRIVAL   | ARRIVAL  | 1 YEAR   | 18 MONTHS   | 2 YEARS  |
|--|---|--|--|---|--|
| <b>Health and Health Care</b><br>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed lost his leg when he was injured in a landmine blast in Afghanistan.</li> <li>• Because of the accident, he now uses a prosthetic leg to help him walk short distances. But standing or walking for long periods of time can sometimes be challenging.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The resettlement agency helps enroll Ahmed in Medicaid to cover anticipated medical expenses. </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed's case worker at the resettlement agency helps him find a medical provider.</li> <li>• Since he does not speak English, Ahmed's son and/or the case worker help him make doctors' appointments.</li> <li>• He has asked his case worker about finding an electric wheelchair, but he is not sure if they can help.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed has a hand injury from the landmine blast and is looking for a doctor to address chronic pain.</li> <li>• At the doctor's office, Ahmed uses a Pashto interpreter. Ahmed is satisfied with the care he is receiving.</li> <li>• Ahmed experiences depression and anxiety related to his family in Afghanistan. </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed uses a walker, but he is trying to find out if Medicaid will pay for a wheelchair.</li> <li>• Although he is still missing his wife and children in Afghanistan, Ahmed is feeling better and less depressed.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Social Services</b><br>                 |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The resettlement agency helps enroll Ahmed in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to buy food and provides cash assistance for utilities and rent. </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed's case worker helps him apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, and he is waiting for a status update. </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed is still waiting for an update on his SSI application.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed is still waiting for an update on his SSI application.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Legal Status</b><br>                    |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed has not filed his asylum application due to the cost, and he is hoping the resettlement agency can help.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The resettlement agency provides Ahmed with a lawyer who helps him gather relevant documents and submit his asylum application. </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed completes his interview for the asylum application.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed is still waiting for an update on his asylum application.</li> <li>• Ahmed receives his work permit, which is valid for the next 2 years.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Community Integration</b><br>           |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed starts visiting an adult medical daycare regularly. The facility provides free meals and social activities.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed spends most days at the medical daycare or at home. Other Afghans come to the center, and he plays billiards with them, shares meals, and exercises. </li> <li>• Some of his neighbors also are from Afghanistan, but Ahmed does not interact with them very much due to conflicting work schedules.</li> </ul>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed continues to attend the medical daycare.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed continues to attend the medical daycare, which has become an important part of his daily routine.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Employment</b><br>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before coming to the United States, Ahmed ran a thriving construction business in Afghanistan. </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed would like to work but he is having a hard time finding a job that matches his physical abilities. </li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cash and rent assistance from the resettlement agency have ended, and Ahmed and his son are facing financial challenges with a limited household income.</li> <li>• They also send money to family in Afghanistan.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed is still looking for employment.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahmed is still looking for employment.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Policy and Program Implications</b><br> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colocating essential services (such as transportation, meals, language training, and social supports) provided by community-based organizations to help with community integration</li> <li>• Culturally competent mental health services to address depression and anxiety</li> <li>• Connection to professional development opportunities that transition new arrivals with disabilities to U.S. employment (for example, skills training, the <a href="#">Job Accommodation Network</a>, workforce development transition programs, or course certificates)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Job training</a>, which includes identifying transferable skills and a description of the kinds of jobs that refugees can apply for</li> <li>• Timely access to legal services to support required updates in documentation status and support helping families reunite</li> <li>• Cultural integration activities (such as English classes or the <a href="#">Life Skills curriculum</a> for English learners)</li> <li>• Social support and community building with people from similar backgrounds</li> </ul> |  |  |   |  |

For more information about the **HEAR Project**, visit [air.org/hearproject](http://air.org/hearproject) | \*This image is an illustration and does not reflect actual study participants.

# HEAR Project: Afghan Refugee Resettlement Experiences

## Mohammed's Story

| Mohammed  | Fast Facts  |
|---|---|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Name (pseudonym*): Mohammed</li><li>• Age: 30</li><li>• U.S. arrival: December 2021</li><li>• Household composition: Lives with his wife</li><li>• Education: Master's degree</li><li>• Languages spoken: Dari, English</li></ul> |

*“Normally, we get up and have breakfast. I go on social media for a little bit and then get ready to go to work. I walk to work – it takes a half hour. I work from 2pm until 10pm, then I come back home walking. I have dinner and talk and laugh with my wife, and then go to sleep. We go to our job and come back. It’s kind of the life in the USA. We have two days off each week, but our days off are not the same. On the days off, we’re cooking and cleaning our house and nothing else.”*

### Prearrival

Mohammed came to the United States from Afghanistan in December 2021. Before coming to the United States, Mohammed worked as a social science researcher in Afghanistan after earning his master’s degree in sociology from a university in India.

While studying in India, Mohammed learned English. Although he returned to Afghanistan after graduate school and did not speak English very much for a few years, his past experience learning English made it easier for him to become proficient quickly as he and his wife worked to integrate into their new community in the United States.

Other members of Mohammed’s family also worked in professional settings in Afghanistan. His brother

*“I had good relationships and networks in Afghanistan. Here, I don’t have my family or close friends. I am completely detached from them. I am just with my wife. In Afghanistan, I was able to find a nice job for myself according to my major. Typically, I did social research like social surveys. But here, I couldn’t find any job [using my degree]. The network is very important in the US. I don’t have a network.”*

\*This image is an illustration and does not reflect actual study participants



was a university lecturer, one of his sisters was a teacher, and another worked as a government employee. Since the evacuation, they now live in Canada, Germany, and Japan. His parents and two other sisters live in Afghanistan.

## Arrival Experience

When Mohammed and his wife arrived in the United States, they spent about a month on a military base in New Jersey. When he learned that they would be transferred to Texas, they decided to leave the military base and go to Maryland because they had friends who lived there. Because they completed a “self-departure” process from the military base, they received initial funds to support their first 30–90 days but they were not formally connected with a resettlement agency and did not have a case manager to support their resettlement.

*“I have parolee status. But I have no idea how to apply for the next step. Last I heard, I need to apply as an asylum seeker, then I will need money to pay for documentation and apply for green card, but I will need a lawyer or something like that. I do not know a lawyer.”*

A friend, another Afghan refugee, helped Mohammed find housing once he and his wife moved to Maryland. To support immediate household needs, Mohammed uses Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to buy food. However, he needs to enroll in Medicaid to cover anticipated medical expenses—his wife has stomach problems and may need ongoing medical care. To enroll in Medicaid, an American friend helped Mohammed apply through the health insurance marketplace in Maryland. About 6–8 months after arriving in the United States, Mohammed received a Medicaid account number but is still waiting for the Medicaid card.

Regarding employment, at first Mohammed was working at a restaurant in the Washington, D.C., area, but he left because it was far from his home. He heard that a nearby hotel was hiring, so he got a job working in hotel reception. It was a challenge for someone still learning how to sift through different American accents, but he could walk to work and the job provided stability. Still, with a single household income, Mohammed struggles to pay for household needs including rent and utilities.

## 1 Year in the United States

Mohammed spends most days working, but he finds time to have tea with his wife when he can. They cook together, talk about daily life, and plan for the future. Sometimes they walk together at a nearby park. He loves walking at sunset and listening to the sound of the rain. He says, *“My wife is sick and we have many other worries. But sometimes we try to joke or look for other excuses to have a reason to laugh. But it is pleasant for us that part of our work in asylum has progressed.”*

After learning about a workshop on legal status education through the Afghan friend who helped him find housing, Mohammed finds a lawyer who can support his asylum application for a \$500 fee. The lawyer helps Mohammed and his wife gather relevant documents and make an appointment to complete their asylum interview.

*“Sometimes we have a lot of happiness, looking back over the year. Sometimes we have very hard times. Particularly, when we did not have any medical insurance, or job, or money. We only had food stamps. It was hard for us. We were patient to get through the hard times.”*

One complication that Mohammed has to navigate is that their SNAP benefits were cut off. He was confused about how and when to submit his paystub to verify income for continued enrollment. He submitted the appropriate documentation and was reenrolled in the SNAP program. Mohammed did receive his Medicaid card, then needed additional support understanding how to find providers that accept Medicaid and how to schedule medical appointments. The American friend who helped him with Medicaid enrollment also was helpful in this process.

Mohammed remains employed at the hotel. He is proud that he can work more independently, but working in customer service is stressful for him. He hopes to earn an additional certificate related to IT or computer skills to improve his employment marketability. His wife was briefly employed at a daycare center, then found a different job working at a large retail store. Her shift is from 3 a.m. to noon, so they don't see each other as much as they would like. Mohammed says, *“We both come home late. Sometimes she comes home very late, and sometimes I do too. And almost always one of us is sleeping. This is not interesting, but for the sake of living, we have to endure for now.”*

There are about 10 Afghan families that live in his neighborhood, but they do not socialize much because of conflicting work schedules. Still, Mohammed says that he and his wife find something to laugh about every night. Having a friend visit or changing their home décor in small ways lifts their spirits.

## **18 months in the United States**

Mohammed completes a driver's education course and obtains his driver's permit. He is looking forward to completing his skills test. They are still waiting for an update regarding the asylum application.

For a couple of months, it is uncertain whether Mohammed and his wife will remain eligible for SNAP and Medicaid benefits. Their SNAP benefits were terminated, and after Mohammed submitted the required income documentation, benefits were not reinstated. Because he and his wife are both working, they are no longer eligible. Mohammed worries that their income also will impact their Medicaid eligibility.

*“On a normal day, we go to our job and come back. It's kind of the life in the USA. We have two days off each week, but our days off are not the same. For fun, we usually organize a party with two or three of our close relatives at home and we talk for a while and spend happy hours. But in general, life in America is very stressful and full of worries. For example, every time a letter comes from the Ministry of Health to terminate our medical insurance, we feel really stressed [because it might not be] renewed again and we cannot pay the necessary medical expenses. It's like the mail came many times before for food stamps and finally they cut it off forever.”*

Recently, Mohammed used their Medicaid coverage to find dental care. His wife was experiencing tooth pain and needed to get a tooth pulled. Mohammed reached out to a nonprofit, integrated healthcare delivery organization, and they connected him with a different agency that helped him find a dentist who accepted patients with Medicaid. Insurance covered the dental procedure, and Mohammed paid \$90 for medicine following the procedure.

## 2 years in the United States

Medicaid coverage for Mohammed was terminated due to lack of eligibility. He now pays for a health insurance plan monthly. The plan does not cover dental care; however, it does cover primary care. In terms of legal status, it has been 9 months since they started the process of applying for asylum, and Mohammed and his wife are still waiting to see if they have been approved. However, with the help of their lawyer, Mohammed and his wife were able to get their work permits extended through 2025. To improve his marketability, Mohammed enrolled in an online data analytics class through Coursera and received a certificate for completing the 6-month course.

Mohammed and his wife have little time to spend together due to conflicting work schedules, but they recently bought a car. This allows them more flexibility in their daily lives. Mohammed says, *“I can drop my wife off at her work. And I can go to work with my car. It takes less time to get to work. It has been a very good change in our life. We can go out for fun and enjoy the other places that are here.”*

Mohammad found a new job through an Afghan friend he met while working at the hotel. He provides administrative support to a social club in the region.

*“This month we devoted more to entertainment. Before the weather gets colder, we wanted to spend more time in nature, so we went to New York for the first time for fun. Also, today is my last day of work at the hotel. I found a new job through a friend. I am very happy that I have found a better job in one year. For sure, it is a great opportunity for growth. And I am sure that I can find a better place next year.”*

## Policy and Program Implications

- Improved connections between government services and organizations supporting resettlement
- A longer time frame for early resettlement support from organizations
- Accommodations to offset the “benefits cliff” (ineligibility for benefits due to a slight increase in household income)
- Professional development opportunities to transition new arrivals to U.S. employment (such as skills training, workforce development transition programs, or course certificates)
- Timely access to legal services to support required updates in documentation status
- Cultural integration activities (English classes or the [Life Skills curriculum](#) for English learners)
- Social support and community building with people from similar backgrounds

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### Suggested Citation

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# Mohammed's Resettlement Experience



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- **Name (pseudonym\*):** Mohammed
- **Age:** 30
- **Arrival date:** December 2021
- **Household composition:** Lives with his wife
- **Education:** Master's degree
- **Languages spoken:** Dari, English

*"Sometimes we have a lot of happiness, looking back over the year. Sometimes we have very hard times. Particularly when we did not have any medical insurance, or job, or money. We only had food stamps. It was hard for us. We were patient to get through the hard times."*

|  | PRE-ARRIVAL  | ARRIVAL   | 1 YEAR   | 18 MONTHS   | 2 YEARS   |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Health and Health Care</b><br>          |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed's wife has stomach problems and may need ongoing medical care.</li> <li>• A friend helped him enroll in Medicaid to cover anticipated medical expenses. </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed received a Medicaid card and his wife was able to access health care.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed's wife needs to get a tooth pulled. He used their Medicaid coverage to find dental care.</li> </ul>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medicaid coverage was terminated due to lack of eligibility. Mohammed and his wife now pay for a health insurance plan monthly. </li> </ul>  |
| <b>Social Services</b><br>                 |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed uses Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to buy food.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SNAP benefits were cut off. He submitted the appropriate documentation and was re-enrolled in the SNAP program. </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SNAP benefits were terminated. Because he and his wife are both working, they are no longer eligible.</li> </ul> |   |
| <b>Legal Status</b><br>                    |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• His legal status is "humanitarian parolee" but he is unsure of next steps to apply for permanent residence. </li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed found a lawyer who helped him gather relevant documents and make an appointment for the asylum interview.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He is still waiting for an update regarding the asylum application.</li> </ul>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With the help of their lawyer, Mohammed and his wife had their work permits extended through 2025.</li> <li>• He is still waiting to see if their asylum application has been approved.</li> </ul>                   |
| <b>Community Integration</b><br>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed learned English while earning a master's degree in sociology in India.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After a month at a military base, Mohammed completed a "self-departure process"; therefore, he was not formally connected with a resettlement agency.</li> <li>• A friend helped him find affordable housing.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About 10 Afghan families live in his area, but they do not socialize much due to conflicting work schedules. </li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed completed a driver's education course and earned his driver's permit.</li> </ul>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed bought a car.</li> <li>• He also completed a 6-month online data analysis course to earn a certificate.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Employment</b><br>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before coming to the United States, Mohammed worked as a social scientist. </li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammad found a job in hotel reception but struggles to pay for household needs, including rent and utilities.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed remains employed at the hotel.</li> <li>• He hopes to earn an additional certificate to improve his employment marketability. </li> <li>• His wife found a job at a large retail store.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammed remains employed at the hotel.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mohammad found a new job through an Afghan friend he met while working at the hotel. He provides administrative support to a private social club in the region.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Policy and Program Implications</b><br> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved connections between government services and organizations supporting resettlement</li> <li>• A longer time frame for early resettlement support from organizations</li> <li>• Accommodations to offset the "benefits cliff" (ineligibility for benefits due to a slight increase in household income)</li> </ul> |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional development opportunities to transition new arrivals to U.S. employment (for example, skills or training, workforce development transition programs, or course certificates)</li> <li>• Timely access to legal services to support required updates in documentation status</li> </ul> |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural integration activities (such as English classes or the <u>Life Skills curriculum</u> for English learners)</li> <li>• Social support and community building with people from similar backgrounds</li> </ul> |

For more information about the **HEAR Project**, visit [air.org/hearproject](https://air.org/hearproject) | \*This image is an illustration and does not reflect actual study participants.