Arriving to Safety

Rebekah Phillips
Director of Refugee Services

Whenever I first meet a newly arrived family, I try to be intentional with my words of welcome, casting vision for their next chapter of life as they establish a new home and community. A phrase I started saying this past year is, “Welcome. We’re so glad you’re here, and that you’re safe.”

The families and individuals we have been resettling from Afghanistan, Guatemala, and Ukraine have escaped very recent violence and persecution; many having left loved ones behind.

Due to the urgency of their situation, these families arrive in Minnesota shortly after fleeing their home country. Upon meeting them, I see in their tired eyes the trauma and images of war that are still so fresh in their minds.

I’m humbled to serve alongside our growing staff and 1,000 volunteers, knowing that the love of Jesus is with us, and meets these families in their place of instability and loss. My daily prayer is that God will be a source of rest for their weary and burdened hearts as He has promised.

In addition to the unique global circumstances requiring immediate refuge for families from certain countries, Arrive Ministries has resettled hundreds more refugees who have spent years in camps or cities awaiting their opportunity to begin a new season. The 367 refugees we resettled this past year have come from 13 countries and represent different experiences of difficulty and resilience. Whether their journey to safety began one year ago or decades ago, I can confidentially say that our communities will be stronger in the future because they safely arrived.

Raihan’s baby was born on a U.S. Military base after the Afghanistan evacuation. His family arrived in Minnesota with a newborn.

Tom is volunteering to teach Imran to drive, and frequently urges Imran to, “Step on it!” Imran is determined to perfect his English.

Refugee Resettlement in 2022

† 77 Homes secured for newly-arrived families

† 367 Refugee & Afghan clients resettled by Arrive Ministries

† 13 Countries of origin represented by our clients
Support Offered to Guatemalan Family Following Escape

The Acevedo family was recently forced to flee Guatemala because of discrimination and threats that left them scared for their physical safety. This past winter they left behind jobs, homes, and family members. Linda Acevedo gifted her house to her church in Guatemala, which was in need of a building to hold services.

“Our safety and our lives come first. We could not be attached to material things when our lives and safety were at risk,” said Linda.

Linda and her brothers Luis and Rolando applied to come to Minnesota as refugees, along with their children and spouses.

The three Acevedos families arrived in Minnesota in January. Linda was in awe of the care she received from Arrive Ministries staff. “We met our Case Manager, Danielle, and she made us feel loved.”

Luis was grateful to meet the friendly and supportive faces of a Good Neighbor team on his first day here. “From the moment we arrived at the airport the team of volunteers made us feel safe,” said Luis.

The team of 8 volunteers from Christ Presbyterian Church supported these families by picking up groceries, providing transportation, and assisting with the initial set-up of three apartments.

After the urgent tasks were covered, the volunteers were able to focus on building friendships and having fun.

“The Acevedos are all so kind and wonderful, a very positive family. While we are trying to give to them, they are really giving back to us by letting us be a part of their family and asking how they can pray for us,” shared Kim, the Good Neighbor volunteer.

“We had never seen snow or so many lakes. We are enjoying the parks. I really like Minnesota,” said Luis.

“It’s been a really great experience, one we hope to continue for years,” said Kim, a Good Neighbor volunteer.

“Everything we do with the team is fun and special for me,” said Linda.
Stranded Days Before Invasion

Ukrainian Family Flees War, Reunites in Minnesota
On February 24, Iryna and Oleg Svavolia’s family of 9 had tickets to fly from Kyiv, Ukraine to Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Svavolias were fleeing as refugees. “About two days before they were due to arrive, I got notification of cancelled travel due to a Covid-19 positive test,” said Ruth, the Svavolia’s Case Manager. Unfortunately, February 24 was also the day Russia invaded Ukraine. “We didn’t know how our situation would be resolved or what would be next, we just hoped in God and prayed,” said Oleg. There was no fuel for their cars or food to feed their family members, so Oleg and Iryna boarded their seven children, ages 4 to 20, onto a train, not knowing where it would stop. “There was no electricity or heat on the train. We would often stay in one spot at night without light, waiting until it was safe to go again. We could feel our train car rattling from the shock waves of the explosions,” said Oleg.

They finally arrived in Poland where, through church connections, a generous family offered to house the Svavolias and five other Ukrainian families. “Of course, it was a bit crammed in the house, but praise God we had a roof over our heads, food, and safety,” said Oleg.

They waited for three months until receiving notice that their family’s airfare to Minnesota had been rescheduled. “We worried on the plane, thinking, ‘Lord, praise you. Is this really it? Have we really reached this goal that we’ve waited so long for?’” said Oleg.

On June 7, 2022 the Svavolia family arrived at MSP Airport, greeted with hugs from sisters, brothers, cousins, uncles and aunts, along with Arrive Ministries staff and volunteers. “That was a very anxious moment. When we landed, we said ‘Praise God! At last, it is over,’” said Oleg. “It was pure joy. Just knowing their story, and finally the day had come. I got to have a little window into this joyous moment in the midst of what is continuing to be a horrible conflict. This one family made it out. This one family got reunited,” said Ruth. “We were very happy, very happy!” said Oleg.

Arrive Ministries welcomes our newly-arrived refugee neighbors in a holistic way, through 90-day case management as well as connecting refugee families with Good Neighbor volunteer teams. The Svavolias have been matched with a volunteer team from Jubilee Church committed to loving and befriending them. “It warmed our hearts that people were taking care of us without even knowing us. People have been supportive because everything is new to us,” said Oleg.

Arrive Ministries’ housing team worked hard the morning of the arrival to secure housing, set-up beds, and furniture, and fill the cupboards with kitchen and household items. “It was all-hands-on-deck. When I am making the bed, I think of the tired family arriving to their new home, and I want them to know as they pull the quilt over them, that they are in a safe place, they are valued, and they are welcomed,” said Ruth. “We are very happy that we are here in this place and that new horizons are opening up. Of course, there will be difficulties ahead, but I think we will overcome them with the help of God,” said Oleg.

“My hope for the Svavolias is that they thrive here in the United States. That they get to rebuild life, and life to the fullest, because they deserve that,” said Ruth.

Watch a video of Oleg and Iryna’s story at arriveministries.org/videos
As twenty-somethings, Amy and Klohbaw are learning to navigate the freedoms and challenges of adulthood together. Klohbaw, who is a Karen refugee, met Amy through Arrive Ministries’ Good Neighbor program; they quickly bonded over their shared stage of life as young adults.

“We are sharing this experience of figuring out how to be adults. There are some similarities and differences, but I think it’s cool how we are both learning so many things in this new stage of life,” said Amy.

Klohbaw is currently taking ESL classes and studying for her GED with hopes to become a nurse someday. These driven, kind-hearted young women love getting to cheer each other on as they work toward their careers and life goals.

“Our friendship may have started as a volunteer opportunity, but it feels equal in the ways that we both reach out, connect, and have fun with each other,” said Amy.

“When we help each other, it’s because that’s what friends do.”

**Volunteers Mobilized this Year**

- 78 Refugee families matched with Good Neighbor volunteers
- 985 Active volunteers from local churches
- 52k Total hours volunteers and refugee friends spent together
- 2,000 People learned about welcoming the stranger at our interest meetings

**Sites in Rochester, Saint Cloud, Willmar, and the Twin Cities**

Two English classes started in Rochester for Afghan men and Somali women.

Weekly sewing classes meet in Willmar and Saint Cloud.
Mohammad Qadeer was a high-level accountant in Afghanistan. When he was separated from his family in the evacuation from Afghanistan and resettled in Minnesota in December of 2021, he assumed the competitive U.S. job market wouldn't allow for him to pursue a career in the finance sector, until he met Briana, his employment counselor at Arrive Ministries.

“Briana was very excited when she heard about my previous experience and started drafting my resume and cover letter, encouraging me to apply for finance jobs. As soon as I would apply, I would get calls for interviews, and sometimes on-the-spot job offers,” said Mohammad.

Mohammad Qadeer, who is a dapper dresser, was grateful for Briana’s help in providing him with dress clothes so he could show up in the proper attire for his interviews.

“Mohammad Qadeer is a go-getter, he would apply for the jobs that I would send him and then apply for 15 more,” said Briana. “At one point he was juggling multiple job offers.”

After finally accepting a position as a full-time property accountant for a real estate company, Mohammad was rewarded handsomely for his work ethic.

“They told me my performance was astounding, I got a letter of appraisal that said I was very much appreciated, and they gave me a raise after three months,” said Mohammad.

Ever the self-starter, Mohammed took a second job as a finance director for a non-profit; but his true career aspirations are entrepreneurial in nature.

“I am trying to find ways to start a business, so I can work for myself,” he said. “Possibly open up a grocery market or restaurant.”

Mohammad Qadeer lives with seven male cousins and Afghan friends in a duplex, and he appreciates how Briana has helped all of them prepare for the job market, gave bicycles for transportation, and advice on contributing to retirement accounts.

“Briana helped us a lot and it was very much appreciated,” said Mohammad.

Briana felt that appreciation every time she visited.

“They would interrupt in the middle of the meeting and offer me food and say, ‘Let’s not talk about business, let’s enjoy some food!’ said Briana.
Volunteer

Teach English. Offer friendship to a refugee family.

Engage Your Church

Collect Welcome Kit items. Form a Good Neighbor team.

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