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From a world away, a U.S. volunteer guides Afghan allies left behind

A woman in Upstate New York struggles to help the Afghan allies her country left behind when the United States ended its war in Afghanistan

By [Abigail Hauslohner](#)

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FAIRPORT, N.Y. — Kim Staffieri woke before dawn to find the latest in the seemingly never-ending stream of desperate text messages and voice mails from Afghanistan.

It was a Monday, one of the four days a week that Staffieri devotes her full attention to helping men and women who once helped the United States during its longest war, but could not leave their country before Taliban militants took over a year ago.

“I have three small children and I’m scared,” read one message. “Please help me.”

At a glance, Staffieri, 56, might seem an unlikely candidate for the volunteer role that consumes so much of her life. She has no law degree, has never been to Afghanistan and never served in the U.S. military. She’s an accountant, which is what pays the bills.

But over the past five years, she has donated thousands of hours of her time to helping Afghans navigate the U.S. government’s program for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) — the visas set aside for Afghans who worked for the U.S. government, at their own peril, during 20 years of war.

The aid gained greater urgency last summer, when the United States withdrew from the country and left the majority of those SIV-seekers behind.

Staffieri, who in 2019 had co-founded the Association of Wartime Allies (AWA) to help SIV applicants,

estimated in a February report that 96 percent of them were still in Afghanistan.

"It's so disheartening to see the U.S., [which] had the biggest interest in this war of any country in the world, turn their backs on people," she said. "If we don't take care of the folks who worked with our troops, who kept our troops safe, who made our troops effective over there, the next time we step into a conflict zone, who is going to help?"

Staffieri comes from a military family and started volunteering six years ago to resettle SIVs in her area of Upstate New York as a way to "help the folks who helped our folks."

"Then I learned about the massive difficulties people were having getting their visas approved," she said. The work sent her down a rabbit hole of need that never let up.

The Afghan SIV program, created by Congress in 2009, is one of the most heavily vetted visas in the U.S. immigration system — partly a product of the U.S. government's discriminatory suspicion of Muslims in the post-9/11 era, and partly a product of America's more broadly dysfunctional immigration bureaucracy, advocates say. Its 14 steps are sometimes redundant and hard to understand — for Afghans and U.S. officials alike.

In the years after the program began, Afghanistan grew more dangerous, and the SIV backlog grew exponentially, slowed further by a Trump administration opposed to immigration and a global pandemic. U.S. officials say SIV processing still takes, on average, more than a year and a half.

The subject of allies left behind has been a sore point for the Biden administration, which has weathered broad criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike for the chaotic way the United States left Afghanistan.

Republican members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Sunday disclosed findings in a report criticizing the Biden administration's failure to evacuate many of its allies last year. The White House dismissed the report as "partisan" and "riddled with inaccurate characterizations, cherry-picked information and false claims."

Despite the urging of nonprofits, veterans and volunteers, the administration did not create a mass evacuation plan for the estimated 81,000 Afghans — SIV applicants and their dependents — who advocates say were waiting for the visas last summer.

A year later, the estimated backlog of SIV applicants and their dependents has surpassed 346,000 people.

While President Biden hailed the successful mass evacuation of tens of thousands of Afghans during the pullout, the administration has repeatedly declined to say how many SIV applicants it evacuated.

Meanwhile, officials say they have continued to move more Afghan allies to safe resettlement in the United States. A senior State Department official said many allies weren't "queued up for us to move them" ahead of the withdrawal.

A few thousand people already had SIVs in their passports but had previously chosen not to leave, department officials said, and the collapse of President Ashraf Ghani's government took everyone by surprise.

"Nobody in Afghanistan, including all of us who were there, felt or knew that the Ghani administration was going to collapse when it did," said the State Department official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, under terms set by the department.

Staffieri is part of a loose network of a couple hundred organizations and scores of volunteers, who came together amid the withdrawal to form the Evacuate Our Allies Coalition and the Afghan Evac Coalition in an effort to get allies to safety.

A year later, many of them are still working toward that goal, with Staffieri and others — like the attorneys from the nonprofit International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) — filling a void of information for thousands of desperate Afghans.

More than 18,000 SIV applicants now claim membership in AWA's Facebook page, flooding its private chat forum and Staffieri's inbox daily with pleas for help.

Staffieri and her colleagues provide answers and raise recurrent problems with the government. The senior State Department official credited the volunteers and nonprofits with being fantastic "partners" in providing applicants with guidance.

But the advocates are frustrated. They say the administration has been slow to address problems, and too many Afghans remain stranded.

"What we are seeing are small improvements, improvements that can make all the difference for an individual, but that are not nearly commensurate with the size and gravity of the task," Sunil Varghese, the policy director of IRAP, recently told reporters on a call with other advocates. "The U.S. military and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan may have ended last August, but the U.S. government's obligations did not."

'I just want to cry because I'm so scared'

Among those still in Afghanistan, there is a profound sense of abandonment.

"They promised me that whatever happened, they would take me to the United States, or take me out of the country," said Mohammed, 60, who said he worked for a CIA contractor for 15 years. The Washington Post is using his middle name to protect his identity.

With SIV applications pending at the time of the withdrawal, his family tried to make it onto an evacuation flight, but couldn't get through the chaos.

"We are 13 people," he said in a phone interview from Kabul, the Afghan capital. His employer gave him

\$5,000 before departing for the United States last summer, he said. “But that has run out ... We have had to sell a lot of our belongings to be able to afford meals.”

There is no longer a U.S. Embassy in Kabul; no clear instructions on how to get evacuated; and no U.S. guidance on how long SIV applicants will need to survive — many of them now a year without income — before they might get out.

Mohammed, who spoke by phone late at night, said he has tried to keep a low profile since the Americans left.

He grew his beard long and tries to dress conservatively “so the Taliban don’t interrogate me when I go out,” he said. “Most of my [former] co-workers conceal themselves now.”

Fearful that the Taliban would kill him if they knew about his work, he has moved his family around Kabul several times. He spoke from the basement apartment they are currently renting, where he had closed the windows against the summer heat, kept his voice low and asked his wife to turn on the fan “so that my neighbors can’t hear my voice carry,” he said.

“I just want to cry because I’m so scared,” he said.

In June, a year after he applied for the SIV, he received a case number. That means the State Department has received it.

‘They need a place to point their anger’

Staffieri, who has not been involved in Mohammed’s case, hears pleas from other SIV applicants in similar circumstances.

They write that they are running out of money; that they have new babies who need to be added to case files; that they think the Taliban is looking for them. They say the U.S. government never responded to paperwork filed long ago, or that they responded with the wrong information.

“My interview was scheduled in Doha ... They thought I was in Doha,” wrote one applicant in Kabul. “Now I am in a bubble of confusion, and I don’t know what to do.”

Some have used their dwindling resources to fund their temporary relocation to Pakistan so that the U.S. Embassy there can finish processing their SIVs. But they’re not allowed to work there, and the costs of visas, rent and mandatory SIV-related medical checks add up.

U.S. officials say the government has no responsibility for the financial woes of those waiting on visas.

But the biggest obstacle, Staffieri says, is the SIV process itself — and that few Afghans have dedicated and competent advocates to push their cases through to completion.

Nearly half of SIV applicants receive denials on their first try. Among the reasons for application denials at

the earliest — “Chief of Mission” approval — stage is missing or incomplete paperwork, or a lack of sufficient documentation of employment from a supervisor, who may be difficult or impossible to reach, particularly if the contracting company is no longer in existence.

State Department officials recently said that of the 77,000 Afghans — which, including their dependents, would amount to an estimated 346,500 people — who have currently pending SIV applications, more than 85 percent have incomplete applications. A department official declined to say whether those applicants had yet been notified.

In 2016, Staffieri took up the case of Sayyed, a military interpreter, who had been waiting two years for a visa.

In 2021, as Staffieri pressed for progress from the government, Sayyed’s application suddenly hit a snag; denied because of what officials described as new “derogatory” information. Attorneys say such information can be as innocuous as having missed a day of work.

It took a carefully drafted appeal — by Staffieri — along with the re-submission of letters from six U.S. military officers all vouching for Sayyed’s loyalty, service and character, to get the decision reversed.

“Most people don’t have that,” Staffieri said. “If they’re lucky, they have one supervisor who writes a letter. He had six, sending letter after letter and calling their Congress members and making a fuss.”

Even then, it took eight years in all for Sayyed to receive his SIV. The Taliban arrived nine months before the visas did, forcing the family to seek temporary refuge in India.

Now they are settling into a new life in Rochester, N.Y., about a 15-minute drive from Staffieri’s house.

Applicants like Mohammed who don’t speak English, are less computer literate or don’t have former colleagues or attorneys advocating for them, face a greater disadvantage, she said.

Sometimes the people begging Staffieri for help get angry with her; that she’s not helping enough, or fast enough. Some are angry at her because they didn’t get evacuated — as if she holds that power. She understands.

“They need a place to point their anger,” she said.

Her dining room has become a small testament of her passion for this country that she has never seen and this specific group of people, many of whom she will never meet. A bookshelf contains Dari and Pashto phrase books, and there is a framed photo of a U.S. military C-17 airplane on the tarmac of the Kabul airport last August, a long line of Afghans visible in the plane’s shadow.

Her computer background is a picture of Sayyed and his children.

“It’s that picture and those little faces that keep me going,” she said.