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America at its Best on Display in Texas

By Russell A. Smith, LMSW

Working at Refugee Services of Texas gives me a unique view of an America at its best, uniting to serve those in need.

At a time when our country is divided on many political and cultural fronts, we have seen Texans from across political spectrums unite and recognize the urgent need to help some of the world's most vulnerable people find safety and opportunity to restart their lives.

From the beginning of the refugee program, where the US resettled Jews fleeing from the horrors of Nazi concentration camps, through the end of the Vietnam War and the breakup of Yugoslavia to today, resettlement is a shining example of this country stepping up to help those in need, and to help alleviate world crises.

Refugee Services of Texas is witnessing a groundswell of support from Texans in every part of the Friendship state.

RST has seen nearly 5,000 people sign up to volunteer since August, and we look forward to more volunteers signing up as our needs continue to grow day after day.

Donations of needed supplies to help refugee families thrive – from school backpacks to toiletries to baby items to new mattresses and furniture – have increased exponentially in the past month. All of our sites are utilizing additional donated space for storage of donated items to help our new neighbors fill their new homes.

We are also seeing incredible financial contributions from donors, and we hope that support continues to grow to meet the pressing needs of this crisis.

We are encouraged by the amazing community support we have received from individuals, businesses, religious organizations, foundations, and many others in our communities – and we are grateful for all the efforts to date.

The continued support from Texans will be instrumental as numbers increase of both Afghan evacuees and international refugees.

Refugee Services of Texas expects to annually resettle 2,500 to 5,000 international refugees per year, once resettlement is back in high gear, though we expect 1,200 to 1,500 in the federal fiscal year that starts October 1. And while it will take some time to rebuild capacity across the network to accommodate 125,000 per year across the country (the new Presidential Determination), these past several weeks have shown us both how much need there is and how well our staff and our communities step up to the plate.

An additional 4,481 Afghan evacuees are expected to be resettled in Texas over the next few months, and Refugee Services will be ready to do its part to offer open hearts and fresh starts to them.

The pressing needs of Afghans fleeing the dangers of their home country continue to be met by compassionate military and aid workers who are diligently processing and vetting every evacuee before resettlement.

We are grateful to be part of the solution to the crisis facing Afghan evacuees and Afghan SIVs – those who hold Special Immigrant Visas for supporting the U.S. military – and we are working closely with our national resettlement partners to welcome evacuees through the Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) program.

The incredible staff and the amazing volunteers of Refugee Services of Texas are working around the clock to accomplish the mission of welcoming. This weekend alone, our Austin staff welcomed 25 new Afghan neighbors.

We urgently call on Congress to make the APA evacuees eligible for extended services that are available to other refugees and SIVs in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

Refugee Services of Texas believes it is our moral obligation to resettle displaced persons, so we're stepping up to play our part with evacuee families, knowing that funding for services is not guaranteed.

Continued financial support from Texans will ensure that we have the ability to provide a full range of services to SIVs and APA evacuees, with or without additional federal funding. Please visit rstx.org to find out how you can help during this historic humanitarian crisis.

Russell Smith, LMSW, is CEO of Refugee Services of Texas