

Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Fact Sheet

August 10, 2021

Why is Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) advocating for the evacuation of Afghan allies?

The rapidly deteriorating security conditions within Afghanistan as U.S. armed forces withdraw necessitate the evacuation of American-affiliated Afghans, including Afghan wartime allies, who have served alongside U.S. troops, diplomats, and government employees in various crucial capacities. Their service puts them and their families at grave risk for anti-American violence and retaliation from the Taliban, and many have been forced to go into hiding, while others have tragically lost their lives. LIRS believes that it is the United States' moral imperative to protect those who have risked their lives for the U.S. mission, and that it is our duty as people of faith to keep our promises and honor the essential human dignity of our Afghan neighbors.

For these reasons, LIRS submitted [recommendations](#) on providing humanitarian protections for Afghan allies to the Biden administration on May 12, 2021. These recommendations were also highlighted in a [letter](#) led by LIRS and signed by more than 70 organizations sent to the administration. Unfortunately, there are significant backlogs in SIV processing which have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and will not be cleared in time to safely protect these vulnerable individuals, as underscored by Refugee Council USA in another [letter](#). Therefore, we are advocating for the urgent evacuation of Afghan allies to U.S. soil to ensure their safety is protected and their service to the U.S. is honored.

How many people are in need of evacuation?

There are approximately 20,000 Afghan allies and an additional 58,000 family members in need of evacuation, according to the most recent estimates made by the Department of State (DOS) relayed to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. LIRS's partners report that approximately 50 percent of these individuals are located outside of Kabul, the only operable evacuation point for the U.S. The U.S. has the capacity and moral obligation to evacuate these individuals swiftly and safely.

Where can evacuees go?

Afghan evacuees can be [relocated](#) to the U.S. or American territories, where they would have access to counsel and the U.S. legal system, including immigration courts. Such rights

and access to counsel are not assured in the third countries that are rumored to be under consideration by the U.S. administration.

On July 16, 2021, it was [reported](#) that the Biden administration would relocate and expedite the travel of approximately 2,500 Afghans - representing 700 SIV applicants and their family members whose visa applications had already undergone security vetting - to an American military base in Ft. Lee, Virginia. The first flight chartered by DOS carried approximately 200 passengers and arrived in the early hours of July 30, 2021. While a notable step forward, this group represents only a small fraction of those SIV applicants in the pipeline who have submitted the requisite documentation for their application and are awaiting further directions from U.S. government officials amid a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.

Historically, the U.S. territory of [Guam](#) has been used as a rapid-response landing point for evacuees from Vietnam and Iraq and, more recently, for American service members quarantining during COVID-19. U.S. agencies such as DOS, the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have both the authority and capability to coordinate this evacuation legally and logistically and to issue parole authorization to Guam for eligible Afghan allies.

LIRS strongly believes that evacuees should be brought to the continental U.S. or American territories and that relocations should not be outsourced to third countries with concerning human rights records and those that do not subscribe to the U.N Convention on Refugees.

Who qualifies for the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa program?

Certain Afghans who were employed as translators, interpreters, or in some other capacity by or on behalf of the U.S. government or by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan are eligible for special immigrant visas (SIVs). To [qualify](#), individuals must be otherwise eligible for an immigrant visa, admissible to the U.S., and have held eligible employment for at least one year. Qualified Afghans may include their spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 in their application process so they may travel together or follow to join the principal applicant after they have been admitted to the U.S.

What happens after an Afghan ally receives their Special Immigrant Visa or is evacuated to the United States?

When Afghan allies and their families are approved by the government for resettlement or are evacuated to the U.S., they may receive assistance with transportation and resettlement assistance, social services, and other benefits. The process is similar to refugees admitted

under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). LIRS is one of nine resettlement agencies in the United States and has assisted over 9,000 Afghan SIV holders. For example, LIRS and its volunteers provide modest furniture, a stocked pantry of culturally familiar foods, and all of the basic amenities of an American home.

Case managers and volunteers support the individual or family in learning to navigate their new community, including through educational enrollment and job placement. Adults are enrolled in English language classes, children are enrolled in school, and case managers guide families in using public transportation and accessing community resources.

What is Congress doing to try to improve the program?

The [Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act](#) of 2021, originally introduced by Sen. Leahy (D-VT), overwhelmingly passed both houses of Congress and was signed into law July 30, 2021. The law includes key provisions for the improvement of the Afghan SIV program, including increasing the number of authorized visas by 8,000, decreasing the employment requirement for eligibility to one year, allowing for the deferral of required medical examinations to expedite visa issuance and evacuation, and providing \$100 million in emergency aid for Afghan refugees. These provisions mirrored those of the [Afghan Allies Protection Act](#) introduced by Sen. Shaheen (D-NH) in June 2021.

Other legislators previously introduced bills that adopted portions of Senator Leahy's proposal to bolster the protection of Afghan SIV applicants, including Rep. Blumenauer (D-OR), Kinzinger (R-IL), Crow (D-CO), and Senator Kennedy (R-LA).

How can I support Afghan Allies and LIRS?

Advocate: Join us in calling on the Biden administration to take urgent action to evacuate Afghan allies by using our [action alert](#) to send a message to President Biden.

Volunteer: Join our community of [volunteers](#) from around the country who dedicate their time to welcoming new neighbors and educating their community members or congregations on issues related to migration and refugees.

Donate: Give to [Neighbors in Need: Afghan Allies](#) to help provide food, housing assistance, clothing, and other basic needs for our Afghan friends as they await the official services available to them.