



Refugee window closing

Sacramento County is experiencing a sharp drop in SIV admissions

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Mohibullah Hanifi arrived in Sacramento just before President Donald Trump slammed America's doors to refugees, asylum seekers and those who risked their lives aiding U.S. armed forces overseas.

The 42-year-old served the U.S. Army as a medical interpreter and trained combat medics for the Afghan military in his home country. The risk to his safety wasn't hypothetical. He says he eventually drew the attention of the Taliban, endangering him and his family.

"I found circumstances more and more dangerous," said Hanifi, the father of six children.

In 2012, Hanifi petitioned the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for a special immigrant visa, or SIV, which is available to Afghan and Iraqi nationals who worked with the American government as military interpreters or in other capacities and have letters of recommendation from a superior.

Then he and his family waited five years.

Hanifi arrived in the United States in 2017, just before SIV admissions nose-dived the following year by nearly 60 percent under Trump. The little more than 8,000 SIVs issued last year to Iraqi and Afghan interpreters, translators and U.S. government workers and their dependents were the fewest in five years, according to data collected by the Congressional Research Service.

The sharp drop in refugee admissions has wreaked havoc on the nonprofit network that helps them settle in a new land. One local organization dedicated to aiding refugees and immigrants, Opening Doors, laid off staff due to the loss in government support that comes with fewer refugee admissions, said interim CEO Debra DeBondt.

"It was traumatic—loss of budget due to the sudden loss of refugee arrivals," DeBondt said.

The financial picture for Opening Doors and other nonprofits is likely to worsen this year under Trump. That's especially true in Sacramento County, which has been among the top destinations in California for refugees. Between the 2013 and 2017 fiscal years, Sacramento accepted nearly 5,000 refugees, third only to Los Angeles (8,515) and San Diego (12,063), according to the California Department of Social Services.

The process for getting into the country under the SIV program is intensive. After Homeland Security approves their petitions, applicants must interview in person at a U.S. embassy or consulate abroad. Multi-layered security screenings are also performed. It can take years to get a visa, and processing times have only ballooned under the current administration.

Those who receive SIVs are admitted as lawful permanent residents and are eligible for the same resettlement assistance and public benefits as refugees.

Hanifi is currently enrolled in the medical assistance program at Sunrise Tech Center & Creekside Adult Center, an adult education program offered through the San Juan Unified School District. He says he was training to be a family doctor back in Afghanistan and is hoping to revive that dream here. He has his green card and is working toward becoming an American citizen.

Another SIV holder and fellow student is Khatera Khushee, who arrived from Afghanistan in 2016. Her husband worked as a computer programmer for the U.S. Army in Kabul, making him eligible for the special visa and her as his dependent. They now live in the resettled Afghan community of Creekside, where she performed so well in an ESL program that the adult school hired her as a part-time instructional assistant.

Khushee says that's different from her experience in her homeland, where she was discouraged from pursuing higher education.

"I was told that I would never be allowed to teach," she said.

Khushee plans to apply to Sacramento State University's teaching program. Like Hanifi, she and her husband have green cards and are working toward citizenship.

If current admission trends hold, there will be far fewer of these stories. In the past six months, the federal government granted entry to only 666 refugees in the entire state, according to the Refugee Processing Center. That's shaping up to mean a 74 percent drop in refugee admissions in California when comparing the 2017 and 2019 fiscal years. □

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Mohibullah Hanifi
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