

Rising to the Challenge: Protecting and Addressing the Trauma of Unaccompanied Afghan Children



Photo By Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images

In August 2021, as the Taliban took over the government of Afghanistan, the United States raced against the clock to relocate our Afghan allies to safety, flying almost 76,000 people out of Afghanistan in a few short weeks. During the chaos, many children became separated from their families—ultimately, at least 1,550 children came to the United States as Unaccompanied Afghan Minors. One year later, the trauma of that separation is a constant ache for these children, only a handful of whom have been reunited with parents or a primary caregiver. Although safe in the United States, their path to a more permanent life and reunification with loved ones is fraught with challenges and uncertainty.

The majority are now living with sponsors in the United States – family members or family friends – while more than 100 have no one to whom they can be released and remain in the care and custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), mostly in long-term foster care.

From day one, KIND has addressed this refugee emergency by helping unaccompanied Afghan children in a variety of ways. Our extensive expertise in working with child refugees and comprehensive services model enables us to address the unique needs of different populations, bringing to bear our experience across disciplines, from legal and social services to family separation and reunification, as well as policy and advocacy.

In the last year, KIND has engaged with 70 children from Afghanistan; some were provided limited legal services while detained and others are being represented by KIND attorneys.

The majority of KIND's Afghan clients are seeking asylum because their family members are targets of the Taliban for their work with the United States government. They are terrified of going back but desperate to reunite with their family, many of whom are still in Afghanistan.

"The client was extremely grateful to have advocates from KIND supporting him through his asylum case. Although he was initially timid, the urgency of the case timeline allowed us to quickly earn his confidence. He was patient with us as we tried to sort through the details of his story and understand his culture and background."

**- Monica Myint,
KIND Staff Attorney**



A new legal landscape

As relocation flights out of Kabul began, KIND quickly pivoted to adapt to the new challenges unaccompanied Afghan children's cases present and the complexities of their legal situation. Through the United States' Operation Allies Welcome, Afghans arriving in the United States, including unaccompanied children, were paroled for two years, during which time they were expected to pursue permanent legal relief. Children separated from their parents or caregivers were deemed "Unaccompanied Afghan Minors" and became entitled to the same benefits available to unaccompanied refugee children except that they had no permanent legal status.

As growing numbers of Afghan children arrived at the shelters where KIND provides legal services, and KIND offices received an increasing number of Afghan children seeking assistance, KIND immediately sprang into action to address their most pressing needs, including:



Ensuring Afghan children received know your rights presentations immediately upon arrival in the shelters which KIND serves.



Providing Afghan children with legal representation or assisting them find a lawyer to help them seek permanent protection.



Working to connect Afghan children with vital services for which they are eligible, including social services.

Taking on intense traumatic experiences

KIND quickly realized the enormous social services needs of Afghan children to address the intensely volatile and traumatic experiences they suffered through. Many were at the airport with their families during the August 26, 2021, suicide bombing that killed over 180 people, most of whom were attempting to flee. Their sudden and accidental separation from family and the uncertainty of when they will see them again is causing enormous ongoing distress. For Afghan children in long-term foster care, the long wait for a more permanent sponsor has compounded their trauma.

First asylum win

The client, a teenager, was separated from his family in the chaos at the Kabul airport, and was flown to the United States alone. He and his family are targets of the Taliban. The boy can now stay safely in the United States and hopes to reunite with his family one day.

Drawing on our extensive existing programming, KIND is providing critical social services support through a culturally responsive lens to address clients' and their families' trauma as they try to adjust to incredibly difficult circumstances. KIND shares tools to help them address the tremendous anxiety, worry, and guilt these children feel about their parents and siblings who remain behind.

KIND is partnering with experts in child psychiatry and play therapy to support the delivery of services to Afghan children and to increase KIND staff's ability to provide access to services through culturally responsive and trauma-informed frameworks. We collaborate with external partners to increase KIND staff's understanding of Afghan culture and the socio-emotional context to help us engage with Afghan children in an appropriate, trauma-informed manner.

Overcoming new challenges

Throughout these efforts, language interpretation has been a significant issue; finding interpreters who speak Dari or Pashto, which most of our Afghan clients speak, has been a challenge, but we are working with a variety of partners to ensure that access to our services is not impaired by language barriers. In one instance, we advocated for a client to use an interpreter of their choice after realizing that the existing interpreter for an asylum interview was inadequate.



Given the chaotic nature of their departure from Kabul, many children do not have the documentation needed for the legal process, such as a birth certificate. This has also presented difficulties in age determinations as well as opportunities for advocacy to find solutions to help with this issue. KIND works with local refugee resettlement agencies to help children access benefits for which they are eligible.

KIND also assists Afghan children with barriers to education and integration as they navigate language and cultural challenges while adjusting to a new system and a new country. KIND has provided GED study materials and support with school enrollment, and helps sponsors find local employment and mental health services resources.

Advocating for Afghan children's rights

KIND is increasingly seen as an expert on policies affecting unaccompanied Afghan children, knowledge rooted in our ongoing work with Afghan children who continue to be referred to KIND for assistance. KIND is particularly recognized for championing reunification of families and serves as a resource for advocates throughout the country on this challenging issue.

From the beginning of the Afghan crisis, KIND has been in constant contact with U.S. executive branch officials and Congressional offices, forcefully advocating for transparent, consistent, and fair policies for unaccompanied Afghan children, including pressing for commitments on reunification. We continue to offer recommendations to U.S. government and international entities for improvements to programs and policies related to family reunification.

KIND is co-chair of the Evacuate Our Allies unaccompanied minors subcommittee, coordinating the flow of information between service providers, legal groups, and resettlement agencies, providing a space for advocacy, problem-solving, and education for everyone working with unaccompanied Afghan children. KIND also serves as a point of contact for those in need of assistance with particularly challenging cases. KIND will continue to build this network on behalf of unaccompanied Afghan children, and to use the lessons learned to contribute to the broader effort to prepare for other mass migration emergencies as they arise.

KIND also supports our European partners' programming, advocacy, and coordination efforts that address transnational challenges of reunification for separated Afghan children with their families.

Backing a simpler path to citizenship

KIND is also urging passage of the newly introduced bipartisan **Afghan Adjustment Act (AAA)** that would provide lawful permanent resident status and a path to citizenship to Afghan allies who were relocated to the United States after the fall of Kabul. The AAA would allow Afghans paroled into the United States, including unaccompanied children, to apply for a green card through simplified procedures. For some KIND clients, this option may allow them to bypass reliving traumatic experiences that form the basis of an asylum application and interview. The AAA will help to reunify families, save lives, and create possibilities for more Afghans to successfully and quickly make the United States their new home. For KIND's clients and their families, it offers further assurance that the United States will not abandon them and that they are welcome in the United States.

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