LIFESTYLE

How one family escaped their war-torn home and a group of U.S. neighbors embraced them

A family of 7 endured a grueling escape from Afghanistan toward safety. On the other side of the world, a group of neighbors embraced them

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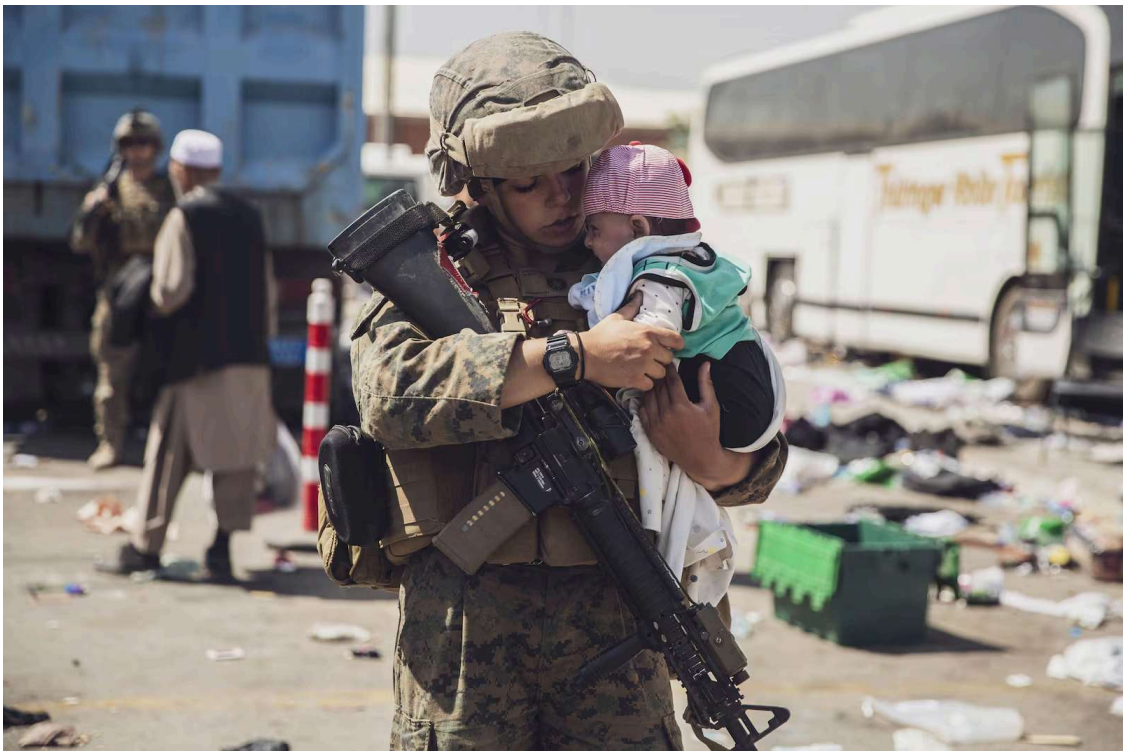
Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, pushes his youngest son, 2, while walking with his wife and 7-year-old son, right, near their home in Beverly, Massachusetts, Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025. The family recently immigrated to the U.S. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

By Mariya Manzhos
Mariya is a staff writer based in Boston. She writes profiles of interesting people and stories at the intersection of religion and culture.

In early August of 2021, Haafiz watched the Taliban fighters closing in on Kabul, where he lived in a three-bedroom apartment with his wife and five children. That summer, he worked mostly at home, as the deadliest wave of COVID-19 swept through Afghanistan.

A softly spoken 45-year-old computer engineer took pride in how far he'd come: he held respected positions working for a U.S.-based aid organization, a job that supported his own family and allowed him to help three other families with medications and urgent expenses.

The closer the Taliban got to Kabul, the more fragile his life appeared. On Aug. 15, when the militants seized Kabul and the government collapsed, he recalled the city descending into pure chaos. Images of people clinging to departing airplanes became a haunting symbol of desperation and the downfall of the Afghan state.



In this image provided by the U.S. Marine Corps, a Marine with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) carries a baby as the family processes through the evacuation control center at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021. | Staff Sgt. Victor Mancilla, U.S. Marine Corps via AP

On the news, Haafiz saw thousands of people flocking to the airport, a frantic epicenter of hope. Cars sat abandoned in miles of gridlock traffic as people set out on foot, desperate to board the military planes departing every few hours. Images of people clinging to departing airplanes flashed on screens across the world — they soon became a haunting symbol of desperation and downfall of the Afghan state.

Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, felt especially vulnerable: working with a foreign aid organization made him a target in the eyes of the Taliban; he also belonged to the Hazara ethnic minority, a group long subjected to persecution and discrimination.

But the security team at his workplace advised him to stay put: the process of leaving could be dangerous, and, like many, they feared the consequences of defying the Taliban. Still, he tried everything to find a way to leave: emailing U.S. lawmakers, messaging contacts, reaching out to German supervisors in hopes of securing a visa. But the time was running out and before any help arrived, the airport was closed.

The bombing area at Abbey Gate is pictured August 26, 2021, in Kabul, Afghanistan, before the blast. A review released Monday, April 15, 2024, says the suicide bombing at the Kabul airport that killed U.S. troops and Afghans in August 2021 was not preventable, and the "bald man in black" spotted by U.S. service members the morning of the attack was not the bomber. | U.S. Central Command via AP

The tipping point came when he received a call from an unknown number, telling him to report to a Taliban-controlled police station or report his address. In two days, another threatening call followed. "I decided that I should either leave or stay," he said. Yet, he was torn – his mother's health was declining, his brother also needed medical treatment. On

the other hand, safeguarding his children's lives felt non-negotiable. "I had to make a choice," he said.

He got rid of his papers and work badges that linked him to his American colleagues. Disguised in Taliban-style clothes, carrying only their passports with Pakistan visas and birth certificates hidden beneath their clothes, the family set out for the border crossing into Pakistan, their only chance at safety.

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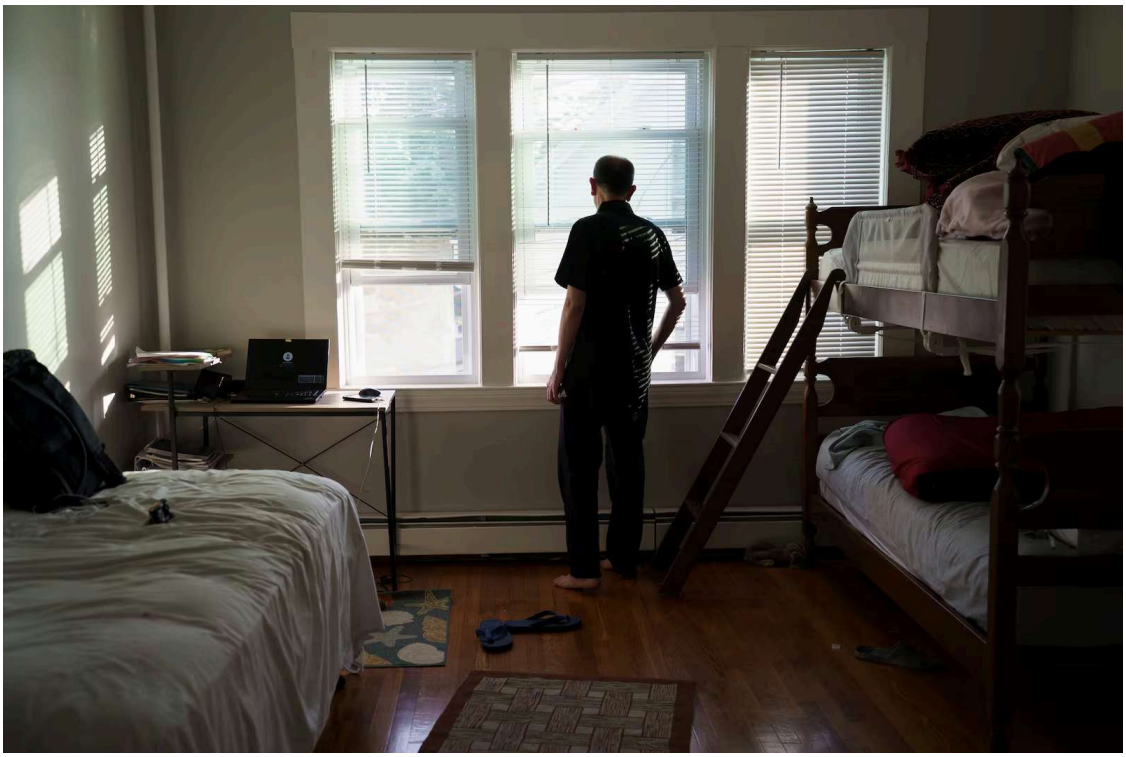


Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, who recently immigrated to the U.S., looks out the window at his new home in Beverly, Massachusetts Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025.. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

While Haafiz was fleeing his war-torn home in Kabul, thousands of miles away in the verdant Boston suburb, Elizabeth Davis-Edwards was racing to find a way to help Afghan families. A community organizer and a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she felt a "moral imperative" to do something as she watched the crisis in Afghanistan unfold. In the frantic weeks following the fall of Kabul, more than 70,000 Afghans were airlifted out of the country. With no infrastructure in place to handle such a massive influx of refugees, Davis-Edwards decided she would build it herself.

While preparing to drive her daughter to college at Brigham Young University, she called up the executive director at the Shapiro Foundation, whose work is focuses on refugee resettlement. A marketer by profession and a longtime humanitarian volunteer, Davis-

Edwards pitched her budding idea: neighbors would form “neighborhood support teams” to welcome refugees and their families, assisting with housing, school enrollment, job searches, legal aid and transportation.

From her home in Bolton, Massachusetts, she began mobilizing her neighbors and church community to welcome the Afghans, many of whom were coming on “special immigrant visas” issued to those who worked with the U.S. government. She connected with a state resettlement agency that matched Afghan families with community teams ready to host them. More and more neighbors and church members joined her Sunday planning Zoom calls that coordinated housing, legal aid and whatever else was needed — in spreadsheets. “And then it just kind of spread,” she said.

Someone offered up their scenic apartment on the lake where the refugees could live for a year. Others provided pro-bono legal services, help with school enrollment, health insurance and just made donations.

“We were building the plane as we were flying it,” she said. In the first few months, the organization rallied about 1,500 volunteers and about 65 teams to welcome nearly 400 Afghan refugees into the communities across Massachusetts and over the border New Hampshire.

Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, stands for a photo at a park near his family’s new home in Beverly, Massachusetts Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025. He and his family recently immigrated to the U.S. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

In the four years since its inception, WelcomeNST — that stands for “neighborhood support team”— is now the nation’s largest privately funded refugee resettlement network, with more than 4,500 volunteers across 300 neighborhoods in 37 states. The organization has welcomed refugees from Ukraine, Haiti, Guatemala, and other countries

upended by violence and crisis. Utah alone has built a sprawling web of support teams, who are walking alongside newly arrived families as they adjust to life in America. “The purpose was to increase our capacity as a country to welcome refugees in dangerous situations,” Davis-Edwards told me.

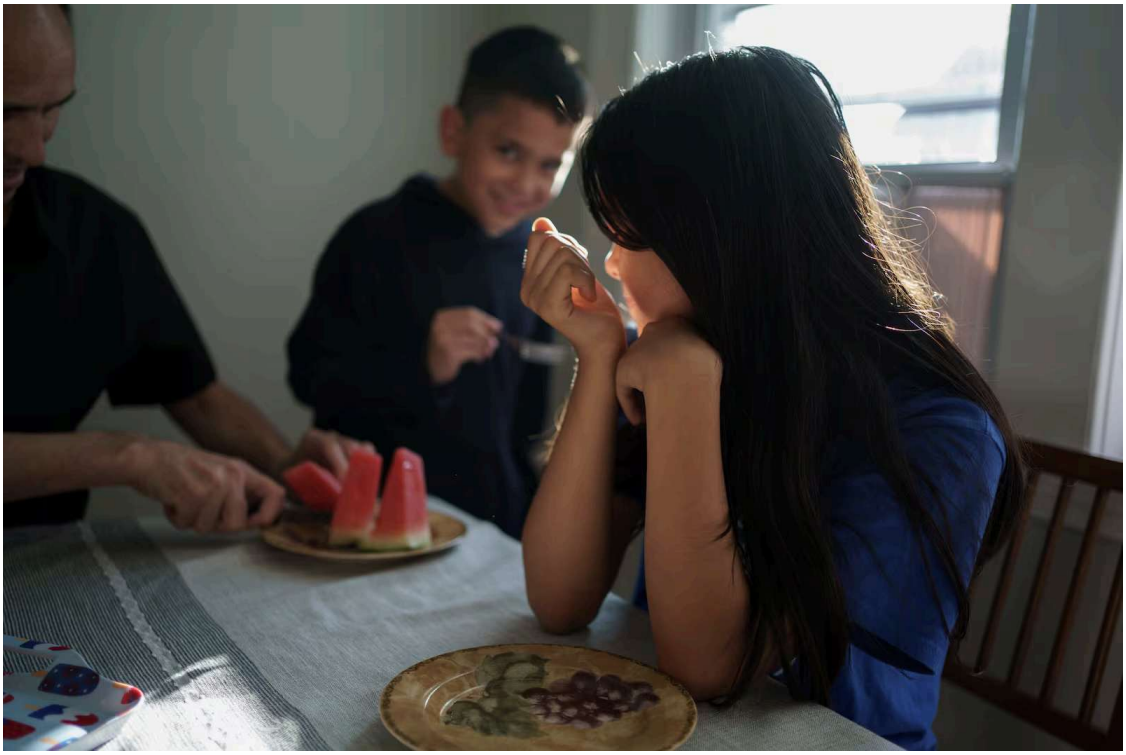
She wasn’t exactly new to this work. As a young mother, she wanted her three kids to see the world beyond their comfortable suburb. So every year, the family went on a humanitarian trip: Ecuador to restore a school after a flood (her daughter, now 18, was only one); Tonga to help with an orphanage; Haiti to rebuild after the earthquake.

In 2016, she heard a talk by Elder Patrick Kearon, now a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who called on the church’s members to embrace the world’s 60 million refugees. His words felt like an answer to a question she’d been nursing about where to focus her efforts.

Through another church member, she got connected to a camp for Afghan refugees in Greece and the following summer, Davis-Edwards and her kids were sharing meals with the Afghans, who told them stories of surviving shootings, carrying shrapnel in their bodies and arriving in Greece with no belongings and no legal ability to work. “There are fundamental things that change when you are sitting on the floor eating a meal with a family and sharing a story about a son being murdered and being put into a bag and left on your front doorstep,” she said. Every single person had a horrific story, she recalled, yet, somehow they emerged from these experiences with hope. “We were never the same after we met those people,” she said.

Still, each time she left the camp, Davis-Edwards felt unsettled. The refugees’ conditions remained largely unchanged—they were trapped with no clear future for themselves or their families. “At the core, we couldn’t solve anything for them,” she said. “All we could do was help ease their journey, make it a little easier.”

The hunger to help



Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, cuts watermelon for his children at their home in Beverly, Massachusetts Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025. He and his family recently immigrated to the U.S. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

At the Torkham border, Haafiz and his family joined thousands of others waiting to plead their case and flee Taliban-held territory. For two days at the border, with no water or food, Haafiz and his family waited. Taliban guards randomly picked people from the line, beating them with sticks and rifle butts. Sometimes, they pulled Haafiz, his wife and his children. “It was a really difficult moment, when they were looking at me with the hope that (I would) do something for them,” he told me. “They were crying and looking at me to do something but I was helpless.”

After a grueling two-day border crossing the family made it into Pakistan and with help from the German government through his former employer, were relocated to Germany. But building a life in Germany proved difficult. Haafiz and his older sons struggled to find work. They weren’t able to enroll in high school and they struggled learning German. Nights often were plagued by nightmares of the Torkham border. “We lost everything completely and I felt useless in a new country,” he said.

Meanwhile, in the U.S., President Donald Trump’s campaign promised job security and stability. “According to his campaign, there would be good job opportunities,” he said. He had received an SIV visa and the family decided to make the leap. “That was a big reason why I decided to come here. I was very hopeful.”

The evacuation from Afghanistan was a mess, Davis-Edwards told me, but it was also a miracle. She could finally offer a solution that changed the lives of refugees in a significant way, embracing them in a stranger’s land. “The people hanging on those planes looked a lot like our friends,” she told me.

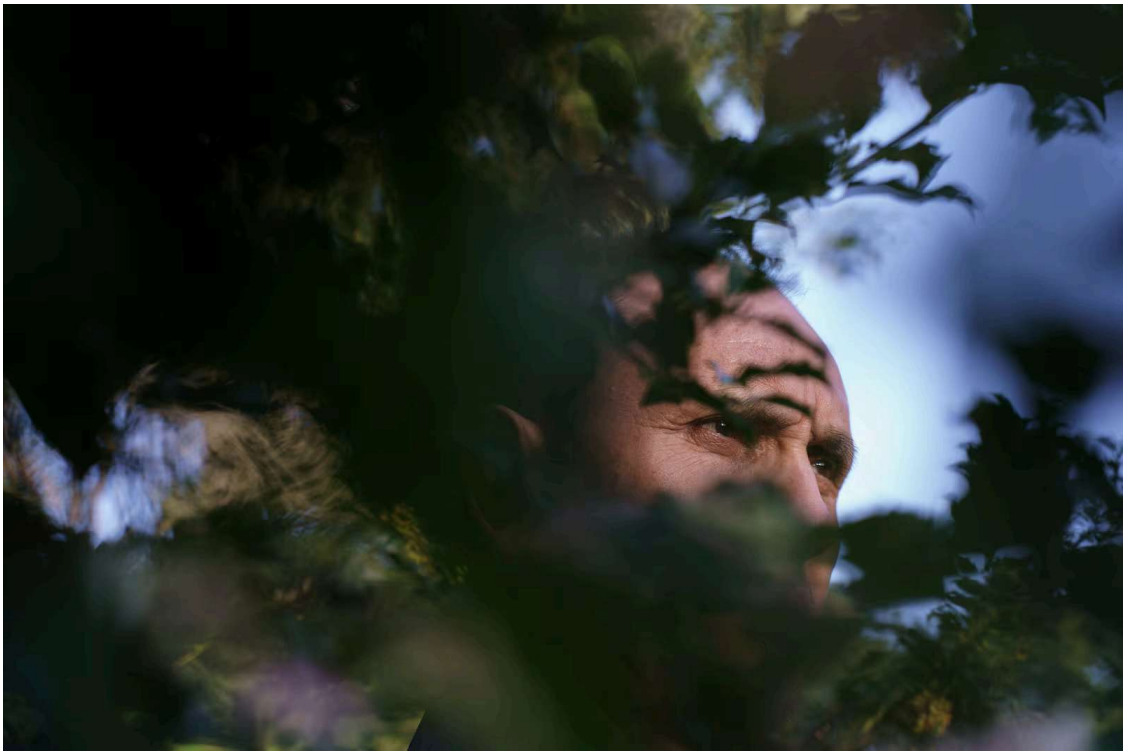
WelcomeNST works with vulnerable families who arrive in the U.S. through legal pathways and are "working hard toward self-sufficiency," according to their website. Since Russia's escalation of the war against Ukraine in February 2022, WelcomeNST applied the same neighborhood team model to Ukrainian refugees.

Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, pushes his youngest son, two-year-old, while walking with his wife and seven-year-old son, left, near their home in Beverly, Massachusetts Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025. The family recently immigrated to the U.S.. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

But recently, the refugee work has taken on new urgency. Recent immigration overhauls and cuts to the resettlement agency infrastructure under the Trump administration have been reshaping asylum and refugee policy, narrowing eligibility and accelerating deportations.

In January 2025, an executive order by President Trump suspended the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), essentially freezing federal resettlement efforts. The order stated, "The United States lacks the ability to absorb large numbers of migrants, and in particular, refugees, into its communities in a manner that does not compromise the availability of resources for Americans, that protects their safety and security, and that ensures the appropriate assimilation of refugees." With the resettlement system decimated, thousands of U.S.-approved refugees were left without caseworkers, Davis-Edwards said.

In June, the administration started sending notices to roughly 500,000 foreign nationals from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela canceling their "temporary protection status" (TPS), although a federal court has restored temporary status for Haiti and Venezuela. Although the same temporary status for the Afghans has also been terminated in July, those who were employed by the U.S. Government can still come through the "special immigrant visas."



Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, is picture at a park near his new home in Beverly, Massachusetts Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025. He and his family recently immigrated to the U.S. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

Meanwhile, Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey began the process of closing all hotel and motel shelters and officially ended the 2023 state of emergency related to the migrant crisis. Compounding these challenges, the recent surge in ICE detentions of those who arrived legally has raised alarms across communities.

“Our focus has been to help people get from where they’re unsafe elsewhere to a place where they can be safe here in the U.S.,” Davis-Edwards explained. “Now, we have families who are here legally, but they are still being targeted for deportation. We used to be a refuge, and now people here need refuge.”

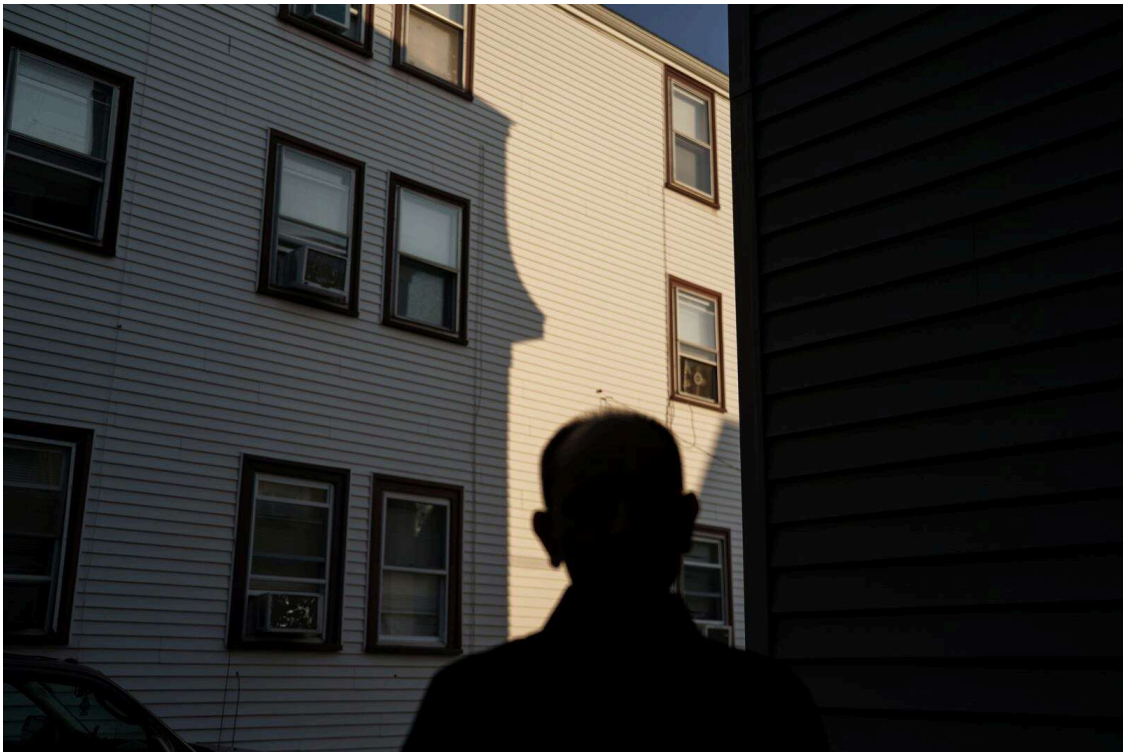
With the focus on supporting families who are already in the U.S. and who many have lost their case workers, WelcomeNST is ramping up its efforts in Utah. On September 16, Davis-Edwards and her team launched a broader pilot project Connect & Lift, a wider partnership between several Utah organizations. Utah Refugee Connection, Salt Lake City’s International Rescue Committee, and Lifting Hands International will combine efforts with WelcomeNST to form support teams then matched with refugee families, who are already in the U.S.

In Massachusetts, Welcome NST is focused on creating neighborhood support teams for Haitian migrants who lost housing amid shelter closures in Massachusetts. More Afghan families could be approved to enter as SIVs, if they have families willing to host them.

Davis-Edwards believes that the moment is here for communities and individuals to step up as state support wanes.

"I feel like we have actually been prepared for this exact moment," she told me, clarifying that "we" is everyone who cares about refugees and immigrants in America.

Superpower of community



Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, stands outside his new home in Beverly, Massachusetts Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025. He and his family recently immigrated to the U.S. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

With the help of a state resettlement agency, Haafiz's family was matched with a group of neighbors from Massachusetts, who coalesced with the help of WelcomeNST. "As we learned more about the family, more and more people wanted to do more, more and more things," said Scott Miller, a member of the neighborhood team that had been taking care of Haafiz's family. In March, 2025, the team picked up Haafiz's family at the airport with a big van, brought them to an Airbnb, and later helped them secure a lease on an apartment.

Miller remembered feeling nervous before meeting the family, aware of the suffering and loss they had endured. Their first meeting was emotional. "We looked at each other and he just came up and hugged me," Miller told me. "I wanted them to feel love and support from us, and I really wanted to meet them where they were."

Haafiz's team, which has about 30 people, is one of the largest at WelcomeNST and is also religiously diverse: nearly six faith traditions are represented in the group, including two Protestant churches, a Christian educational organization and a synagogue. Some on the team aren't religious, but share the values of welcoming the stranger in a foreign land.

Miller has watched people "expand" by taking on roles they never imagined they could. The team, functioning like an extended family, has helped Haafiz and his sons study for their driving tests, navigate legal paperwork and enroll his children to school. They've

gathered for potlucks and playdates. “None of this was in any of our comfort zones,” he said. “Seeing everyone step out of that and do something new was really cool.”

For Haafiz’s family, the warmth and respect they received instilled in them a renewed sense of belonging, something the family hadn’t experienced since leaving Kabul. “It was the first time in years we truly felt safe and hopeful,” he told me. “We got our hope back — the hope for life.”

Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, who recently immigrated to the U.S., hugs his 7-year-old son Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025. The family of seven recently immigrated to the U.S. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

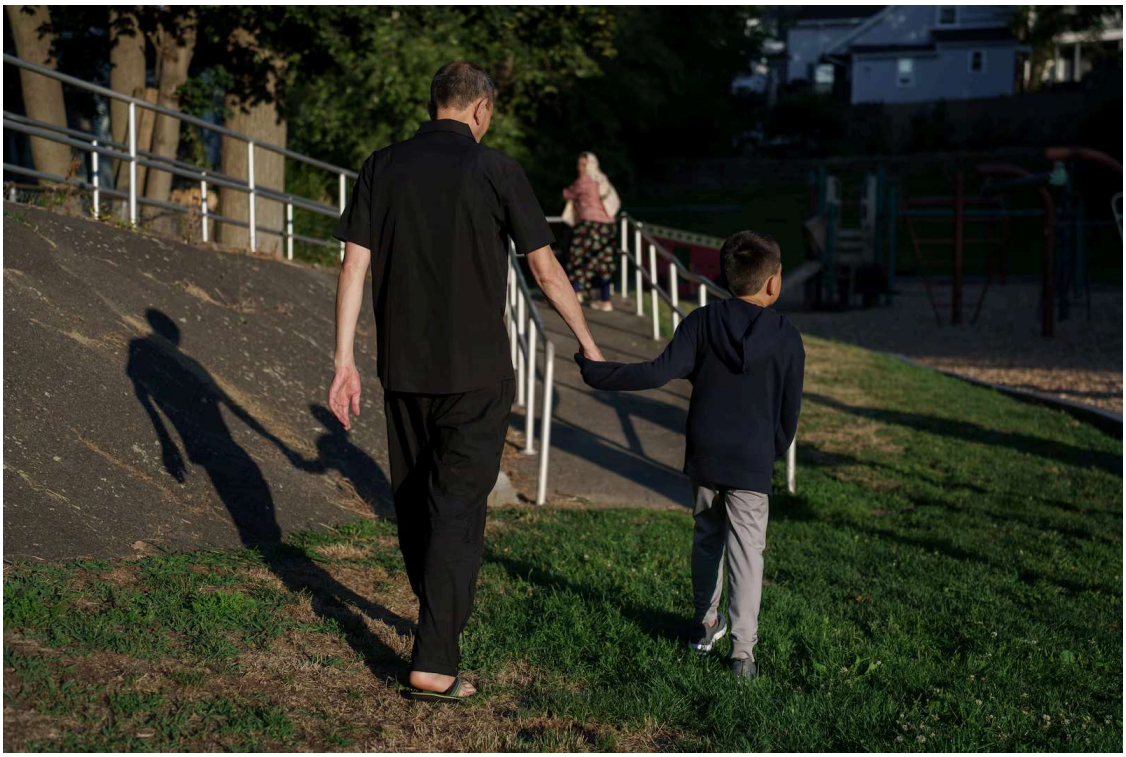
But there are challenges, too, some the family has experienced in Germany. Haafiz has applied for roughly a hundred jobs without success. Trained in computer science and software and data engineering, he’s searching for work — anything that will allow them to stand on their own. His son just got a temporary job at a grocery store. Haafiz is eager to build a life that doesn’t depend entirely on others. “We don’t want to continue like this forever,” he said. “We want to stand on our own feet. I see a lot of people who are struggling, but they are helping me.”

Haafiz now holds a green card, a tangible symbol of stability for immigrants, though it no longer offers the same sense of security it once did. I asked whether Haafiz feels safe in America today. “We are not hearing any stable plan about whether refugees will stay or will not stay. It is very difficult,” he said. He’s always viewed America as an ideal of a law-abiding nation. “Everyone expects everyone to obey the law,” he noted, “but I see something different from the government, and that makes me nervous.” Yet, he remains motivated to build a future for his family.

Davis-Edwards envisions creating a network that extends beyond immediate assistance. She wants to start a nation-wide movement, building momentum to welcome refugees state by state, beginning with Massachusetts.

“To me, the superpower of the community is to welcome a stranger,” she said. “It is to say, ‘Listen, we have this community... and we don’t realize how powerful that is. We forget or maybe we just don’t know it.’” These types of neighborhood networks often outperform paid placement programs, she said, noting that it’s not a criticism of caseworkers, but simply a testament to “the power of community.”

She’s witnessed how the work changes lives on both ends: “We always talk about giving as something that helps others, but the real beauty is that it changes you.” She added, “The power of community at its best is loving our neighbor. It’s the simplest thing.”



Haafiz, who asked to be only identified by his first name, walks with his wife and seven-year-old son, right, near their home in Beverly, Massachusetts Thursday, Aug. 7, 2025. The family recently immigrated to the U.S. | Jodi Hilton for the Deseret News

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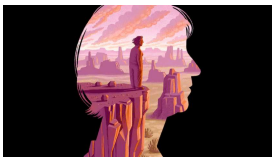

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