

TOGETHER

a monthly bulletin insert from the archdiocese



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IOWA IMMIGRANTS SHARE THEIR UNIQUE GIFTS

By Cassie Bird

It's been one year since the publication of the story of the Afghan evacuees who are being assisted by Catholic Charities' Immigration Legal Services (ILS) program. The original story can be read here: www.archdioceseone.org/yga-1222. In the past year, the attorneys and staff of Catholic Charities have been hard at work assisting the Afghan people, largely based in Cedar Rapids, who fled Afghanistan following the United States' military exit in August of 2021. The evacuees are men, women and children; many had worked alongside the US government in Afghanistan for 20 plus years.

There are numerous ways in which Catholic Charities staff have been working to assist Afghans in getting on the track to legal permanent residency, or a green card. One such method is to apply for asylum, and as of the end of November 2023, Catholic Charities received seven asylum approvals of the 27 asylum cases they have filed so far. Staff continues to be busy through the end of the year with answering the call to provide legal representation to clients who are required to appear in Omaha, NE for their asylum interviews and hearings with the DHS/USCIS Asylum Office.

The Next Chapter of Saadat's Story

There is also an exciting update regarding Saadat Ahmadi, who was interviewed for



Saadat Ahmadi, Interpreter/Navigator
DOJ-Accredited Legal Representative

the last article about the Afghan evacuees in December of 2022. Over the past year of being with Catholic Charities, Saadat has worked as an interpreter/navigator helping to provide language and case management services for clients in the Cedar Rapids area. Not only that, but Saadat was one of the thousands of Afghans evacuated in 2021. He joined the Catholic Charities team in March of 2022 to help others, even as he was trying to start a new life himself.

The good news? Saadat was one of the seven clients who received his asylum approval. This means he will have a pathway to legal permanent resident status (which means he is eligible for a green card after one year). Saadat has also been granted approval by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to be an accredited legal representative.

Yer Vang, Director of Immigration Legal Services said, "This is a tremendous achievement for him (Saadat) and our agency because of our limited capacity in not being able to hire an attorney last year. Saadat's accreditation allows us to expand

our services to serve Afghan immigrants and other refugees with their immigration needs."

"As an accredited Department of Justice (DOJ) legal representative, this allows Saadat to represent and serve immigrants and refugees on their immigration applications or cases before the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The one limitation with his accreditation/certification is that he cannot represent clients before Immigration Court."



Yer Vang, Director of Immigration Legal Services
Immigration Attorney

Beyond the asylum cases that Catholic Charities staff attorneys filed over the past year, program staff also provided several large volume legal workshops. One of which was to help file renewal of parolee status for 60 to 70 individuals for another two years under this status. This extension will allow for more time to move through the backlogged immigration system at the national level. Applying for different statuses is done in stages by Catholic Charities staff, to try to obtain either the special immigration visa (SIV) or asylum for the Afghan evacuees.

The SIV is given to individuals who worked directly with the United States military or government in Afghanistan. “These are individuals who worked on behalf of and with the United States government in Afghanistan and were promised a pathway to legal status because of their commitment to the US,” Vang said. However, a very small percentage of individuals qualify for this, and so the next step is to aid them in applying for asylum.

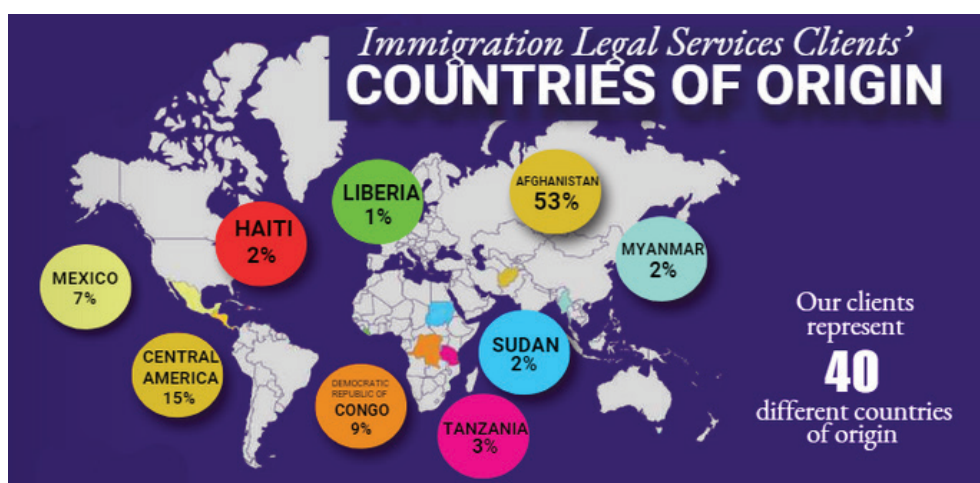
Catholic Charities’ Immigration Legal Services continues to be innovative in their delivery of services to make sure immigrants and refugees in the Archdiocese are served to the best of our ability and capacity.

This year in recognition of the legal progress Catholic Charities has done in the delivery of legal services for Afghans in Iowa, Catholic Charities was given funding support from the state-wide group called Afghan Legal League (ALL-Iowa) to hire another Afghan interpreter to help with language access and reducing barriers for Afghan immigrants. The new interpreter will be taking over Saadat’s previous role because Saadat will be transitioning to his new role as a DOJ legal representative in 2024.

Iowa’s Immigrant Population

Many Iowans don’t realize just how large of a role immigrants play in our archdiocesan communities. Iowa is home to 170,118 immigrant residents, who combined have \$4.8 billion in spending power, and who paid \$1.7 billion in taxes in 2021. They account for 4.6% of entrepreneurs in the state, 17.8% of construction laborers, and 15.4% of postsecondary teachers. Not only that, but immigrants are more likely to be working age (83.7% of immigrants) than U.S. born citizens (60.7%). This means that they are able to contribute not only by participating in our workforce, but also means that they are able to contribute as taxpayers to help fund programs that benefit our population and communities.*

Vang commented on the misconception that immigrants arriving to Iowa are only looking to take advantage of the (temporary) assistance they receive from



the United States government.

“I would say the immigrants who we encounter don’t want a handout - they just need a helping hand to reach their potential.”

She also shared that most immigrants learn English as quickly as possible, and want to work as soon as they are able to in order to provide for their families financially. They want to work, contribute to the local economy, and volunteer just as they did back in their home countries. They all have unique gifts, talents, and professions that they contribute to our communities. And now, many local economies in our state could not survive without them participating in our workforce.

Serving the Entire Archdiocese

Catholic Charities’ Immigration Legal Services program is not limited to Cedar Rapids. The program staff works hard to reach every corner of the archdiocese, as there are immigrants in every one of our archdiocesan communities. Vang commented that if parishes have a need, their staff is more than happy to travel to offer consultation services for individuals in their communities who may qualify for services.

Vang said, “If donors invest in us with their dollars, they’re investing in our parishes, in the immigrants who are members of our parishes, and in our communities. Our goal is to strengthen families and individuals by stabilizing their legal status so they can be self-sufficient and contribute to our communities.”

Immigration Legal Services Clients Served in 2023

Beyond the Afghan population, Catholic Charities assists clients from 40 other countries of origins, which you can see in the map below. These statistics are based on clients served in their 2023 fiscal year, which ended on October 31, 2023.

Looking Ahead

In regard to the next year of Immigration Legal Services, the goal, as always, is to serve as many individuals as possible with their legal needs. Over the next year, Catholic Charities will work to not only sustain their current level of programming, but also continue to be innovative and collaborative in how they can enhance the immigration ministry to the most vulnerable.

**Data from the American Immigration Council from 2021, www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/locations/iowa*

ArchdioceseOne Update

Thanks to your sacrificial gift, over \$17.3 million has been raised for the ArchdioceseOne special appeal. Over \$8.3 million of this amount has been left unrestricted, and over \$1.25 million has been restricted to Immigration Legal Services.