

Caring for Afghan Newcomers: Immigrant Health Matters

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Immigrant Health Matters (www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/ihtmatters.html) is a quarterly series of brief vignettes focused on immigrant health and health equity. Articles are designed to be read in three minutes and to provide an immigrant's perspective of challenges in achieving health equity.

The scenario

Abdi Physician assistant Roberto Castillo has a busy schedule in his primary care clinic in Houston, Texas. He has been seeing immigrants for years, but in late 2021 started to see an influx of Afghans. "This is a patient population I don't know anything about," he thought to himself. On his schedule today was a family: father Saboor, wife Salma, and their five children, ranging in age from 3 months to 12 years old (those who viewed the November 2022 ECHO Newcomer Health: Afghan Health Considerations (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IBfKbVkf1ALsoNDDkK9C1rWCHxNpdxVp/view>) webinar will recognize this family was discussed in detail).

Mr. Castillo felt simultaneously interested in seeing someone from a country about which he had no knowledge and anxious about how to best care for the family. He had kept up on the humanitarian crises following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Other than that, he knew many Afghans were coming to Texas and wondered about where he could find more information about their health issues.

Salma and Saboor were also anxious about the upcoming appointment: "How will we all get there? Will the provider be kind? Will they know anything about us and why we came to America? And why do we have to have more health checks, when we have been through so many already? We are actually more worried about finding a job for Saboor and school for our children."

The challenge

Time constraints

PA Castillo was accustomed to seeing large immigrant families, and his clinic had a good relationship with the state refugee health program and resettlement agencies. His entire morning was blocked out to see the family. A ride had been arranged and a Pashto interpreter pre-scheduled. This greatly helped with time management, and he had a few minutes to read about Afghan new arrivals while the family was being roomed.

Lack of knowledge about health issues specific to Afghans

Even though Roberto had seen refugees before, as he quickly realized from reading the rapidity of the Afghan exodus meant the usual overseas screening protocols had not been able to be followed. Many arrived at military bases in the U.S. and Europe without medical pre-screening and vaccinations. A herculean effort to house and feed over 120,000 was rapidly put together via Operation Allies Welcome. Several localized outbreaks of chickenpox, measles, and SARS-CoV-2 occurred on the bases. Vaccination programs were rapidly instituted, and tuberculosis screening began. Evacuees began leaving Afghanistan in August 2021, and the last U.S. bases housing Afghan arrivals completed their work sending Afghans on to resettlement states in October 2021.

He learned quickly that Afghanistan had poor childhood vaccine coverage, estimated by the WHO to be 60%. He also learned he should be aware of diseases including leishmaniasis, malaria (particularly *Plasmodium vivax*), and tuberculosis.

What you can do & resources

PA Castillo's quick internet search revealed a wealth of information and connection to local refugee health experts and resettlement agencies. He learned that Texas was the top receiving state for newly arriving Afghans in FY2021-2022, followed by California and Virginia, and that their immigrant status was quite complex, including both parolees and special immigrant visa (SIV) holders; parolees could also become asylum seekers. He knew this would impact health benefits, and knew he would have to involve the clinic social worker for assistance.

Learn more about Afghan history and cultures

- Register to access the [Caring for Newly Arrived Afghans](https://learning.umn.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=31365397#courseSectionDetails_31365796) (https://learning.umn.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=31365397#courseSectionDetails_31365796) course hosted by the University of Minnesota for an excellent brief overview of recent Afghan history and cultural issues, including a talk by Afghan-American physician, Dr. Mehria Sayad-Shah.
- [Newcomer Health Profiles: Minnesota Center of Excellence in Newcomer Health](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/profiles/index.html) (www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/profiles/index.html) has select refugee health profiles which can help clinicians learn more about the history and culture of patients whom they are seeing.
 - An interim [Afghan Refugee and Humanitarian Parolee Health Profile](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/afghanprofile.html) (www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/afghanprofile.html) is available through the Minnesota Center of Excellence in Newcomer Health.
- [EthnoMed: Caring for Afghan New Arrival Community](https://ethnomed.org/other/afghan-new-arrivals/) (<https://ethnomed.org/other/afghan-new-arrivals/>) has compiled an excellent list of resources.
- The [Migration Policy Institute](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/) (www.migrationpolicy.org/) is an outstanding, authoritative resource for detailed information on migration, addressing many myths and misconceptions.

Review resources specific to Afghan new arrival health issues

- [Guidance for Clinicians Caring for Individuals Recently Evacuated from Afghanistan](https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/109917) (<https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/109917>) CDC's Emergency Health Alert from September 2021.
- [Afghan Clinical Guidance](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/afghan.html) (www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/afghan.html) Minnesota Center of Excellence in Newcomer Health clinical guidance for care of Afghan new arrivals.
- [ECHO Colorado: Newcomer Health](https://sites.google.com/view/newcomer-health/) (<https://sites.google.com/view/newcomer-health/>) This series is for health care providers who want to expand their knowledge of resettlement and health issues of newcomers, including refugee, immigrant and migrant (RIM) populations.

Review the approach to the refugee new arrival screening exam

- [CareRef](https://careref.web.health.state.mn.us/) (<https://careref.web.health.state.mn.us/>) is a tool that guides clinicians – based on patient age, gender, and country of origin - through conducting a routine post-arrival medical screening of a newly arrived refugee or other immigrant to the U.S.
- [Key Clinical and Cultural Considerations for the Domestic Medical Screening](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/screen.html) (www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/screen.html) was created with considerations for performing official Domestic Medical Screenings but also includes helpful information for providing care to newcomers, generally.

- [CDC: Refugee Health Domestic Guidance \(www.cdc.gov/immigrant-refugee-health/hcp/domestic-guidance/index.html\)](http://www.cdc.gov/immigrant-refugee-health/hcp/domestic-guidance/index.html) was created to guide providers who conduct the initial medical screening for refugees that typically occurs 30-90 days post-U.S. arrival. However, the guidance may be helpful for all providers working with Afghans.
- [UpToDate: Medical care of adult refugees, immigrants, and migrants to the United States \(www.uptodate.com/contents/medical-care-of-adult-refugees-immigrants-and-migrants-to-the-united-states\)](http://www.uptodate.com/contents/medical-care-of-adult-refugees-immigrants-and-migrants-to-the-united-states) is a guideline for the refugee new arrival screening examination.

Connect to colleagues

- Many state health departments have a refugee health program, and searching for specific information on state health department websites may be helpful, particularly if you would like to receive copies of overseas examinations that occurred as well as domestic medical examinations of refugees.
- There is a thriving network of clinicians, nurses, social service staff, and national experts who connect through their professional society. This includes a very useful listserv where a helpful Q&A occurs: [Society of Refugee Healthcare Providers \(https://refugeesociety.org/\)](https://refugeesociety.org/).
- Alternating between Canada and the United States annually is the premier academic event for refugee and immigrant health professionals: [International Refugee and Migration Health Conference \(https://refugeesociety.org/refugee-health-conference/\)](https://refugeesociety.org/refugee-health-conference/).
- The American Academy of Pediatrics has a [Council on Immigrant Child and Family Health \(www.aap.org/en/community/aap-councils/council-on-immigrant-child-and-family-health-coicfh/\)](http://www.aap.org/en/community/aap-councils/council-on-immigrant-child-and-family-health-coicfh/) and an active listserv. You must join the AAP to be able to access this Council's listserv.

Connect to other national resources

- [CDC: Immigrant and Refugee Health \(https://www.cdc.gov/immigrant-refugee-health/\)](https://www.cdc.gov/immigrant-refugee-health/)
- [MDH: Center of Excellence in Newcomer Health \(www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/index.html\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/index.html)
- [Migration Health Initiative \(https://mhi.taskforce.org/\)](https://mhi.taskforce.org/)

Lastly, for more in-depth learning, Global Medicine at the University of Minnesota offers a free seven-hour introductory course on refugee and immigrant health care: [UMN Medical School: Introduction to Immigrant and Refugee Health Course \(https://med.umn.edu/dom/education/global-medicine/courses-certificates/online/introduction-immigrant-refugee-health-course\)](https://med.umn.edu/dom/education/global-medicine/courses-certificates/online/introduction-immigrant-refugee-health-course).

The appointment

Saboar, Salam, and the children were able to attend the appointment with a ride arranged by their refugee resettlement agency. The clinic had arranged an in-person female Pashto interpreter, who was very welcoming. Saboar had been an interpreter for the U.S. Army and did not understand why an interpreter was needed. PA Castillo explained that the clinic has a policy that all adults are seen with a professional interpreter, and this was accepted. The clinic staff seemed kind and caring, asking about their journey to America, taking time to establish rapport, and explaining the concept of having a primary care provider and clinic for the family. Greatly appreciated at the end of the visit was time spent with the clinic social worker, who helped review housing and educational opportunities in the neighborhood. The family left the clinic feeling as though they had made a connection with a health care team in America and were on to their next challenge.

Discussion questions

After reading the full scenario, use the following questions to reflect and create opportunities for discussion.

1. How should I prepare to effectively communicate with Afghan newcomers?
2. What are the primary health concerns for Afghan newcomers?
3. How can interorganizational teams cooperate to improve healthcare for Afghan families?
4. What additional resources can providers integrate into their practice?

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