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# Area prepares for possible Afghan evacuees

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NEWBURYPORT — Massachusetts could soon be home to roughly 900 Afghan evacuees and local leaders hope to welcome them.

The federal government is looking to resettle thousands of Afghans housed at U.S. military bases.

Gov. Charlie Baker's administration announced last that Massachusetts could take in as many as 900 evacuees and the state is coordinating with the federal government and local nonprofit agencies to handle the influx.

Newburyport Mayor Donna Holaday said her city is happy to help but is still awaiting further details.

"We would be more than willing to open up our community and provide support to the Afghan refugees in any way that we possibly can," Holaday said. "We're not sure how many there would be and I don't believe that Gov. Baker knows either."

Holaday added that she is confident Newburyport's interfaith community would rise to the occasion to welcome Afghan refugees.

"Granted, we don't have a lot of resources," Holaday said. "But, with the summer season closing on Plum Island, maybe we could get some rentals there. I feel that our community will really step forward and support this effort in any way that we possibly can."

"We can certainly organize a group of people to reach out and look for any potential vacant apartments or homes for rent," she added. "Whatever it will take to help these people who have been through so much to relocate."

Amesbury Mayor Kassandra Gove said in a press release Friday that her city would also welcome Afghan refugees.

"While I expect the focus to be metropolitan areas like Lawrence, Lowell, Springfield and others, the City of Amesbury welcomes everyone looking to relocate here," Gove said.

"I am happy to work with the governor's administration and the federal government, as well as our local nonprofits who provide this kind of assistance for any refugees who settle here," the mayor

added. “I look forward to learning more about how Gov. Baker’s team plans to financially support this group and the communities who work to get them settled.”

Gove said everyone deserves the opportunity to raise their families in a safe environment.

“I hope that everyone in Amesbury, our neighboring communities and across the commonwealth works to welcome them to our communities,” Gove said.

The Rev. Joan MacPherson of Main Street Congregational Church in Amesbury said she has already heard people talking about refugees possibly coming to the area.

“There is the International Institute of New England that has done a lot of work with refugee settlement, reaching out to our area of clergy,” MacPherson said. “The Merrimack Valley Project Interfaith Sanctuary Network is in conversation with their congregations and the Main Street Church to see about capacity, ability, interest, volunteers. So yes, there are clergy and congregations that are talking about these things.”

The Rev. Jarred Mercer, rector at St Paul’s Episcopal Church in Newburyport, said he also has been speaking with fellow clergy about how best to help the refugees.

“There is no question about it that we should be finding every means possible and everything that we could possibly do to receive, welcome, embrace and include whatever refugees our way,” Mercer said.

“Jesus himself was a refugee who had to flee from an empire,” he added. “I think that welcoming those who have the deepest need and are vulnerable in our world is our absolute moral imperative. It is an imperative of love and loving our neighbor. I couldn’t consider myself a follower of Jesus, I couldn’t consider myself a personal faith at all without holding that view. It is an absolute moral imperative.”

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