

ST. LOUIS HIGHLIGHTS

February 28 – March 2, 2024

With the help of 72 service providers, our team arranged much-needed support for 776 guests in St. Louis, representing 78% of the newly arriving population. While we cannot share every amazing story from our work, we can shine the spotlight on a handful of compassionate professionals who made a significant difference for so many participating. We look forward to continuing our work March 21 – 23 at the Oncenter in Syracuse. For more information, please visit [CentersforAfghanSupport](https://CentersforAfghanSupport.org).

Kindness Starts with Me began in early 2022 when founder **Letty Goering** learned about the many Afghan families stuck in hotels, given the large influx of arrivals the previous year. She wanted to ensure children were enrolled in school and that families were introduced to the city. Letty began working with the school district, organizing field trips to the zoo and local museums, and helping with grocery shopping. Soon after, they partnered with Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to secure a welcome center on their property, providing space to begin offering community-building programming. Today, Kindness Starts with Me has a staff of 10 and works with more than Afghan 60 families.

Shukria was one of the first students they began working with. Her father was a professor of Turkish literature at a college in Kabul and was a firm believer in the power of education. Shukria attended good schools and arrived in America determined to continue her studies. She joined Kindness Begins with Me to serve as an interpreter for women working on obtaining their driving permits. After six months, she was hired as a teacher and now leads the driving training sessions with the help of support staff. Shukria is now a sophomore in high school, focused on math and science courses and planning for college.

Every Thursday night, Kindness Begins with Me transports and teaches English to about 150 refugees. Instruction includes play-based learning for young children, as well as conversation and writing classes. For more advanced English speakers, classes include coding, public speaking, and college or vocational school preparation. This approach has made English learning possible for many refugee mothers who would not otherwise be available for instruction.

At Monday education socials, Afghan women participate in skill-building courses – sewing, embroidery, crocheting and baking – all while creating new friendships and improving their English language ability. **Women’s Education Social Coordinator Winona Black** said, “When I was a child, I learned the inscription on the Statue of Liberty. I was so inspired and wanted to help refugees who were coming to our country.”

Letty shared, “This Support Center has been so helpful, allowing us to expand our network, reduce duplication of services and provide comprehensive support to these families. The ability to connect with new providers and strengthen our relationships has been amazing.”



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[Parkway-Rockwood Community Education](#) (PRCE) provides a wide range of services to residents in the St. Louis area, including free adult education and literacy classes taught by more than 60 certified teachers. Classes are individualized, and students can work at their own pace to gain the skills they need to receive their High School Equivalency (HES).

Instructor Mary Foushee discussed her work with a determined and inspirational young woman from Afghanistan named Farkhonda. She was able to escape the country with her brother, mom and dad, but could not bring all her siblings. In Afghanistan, she was not allowed to attend school and was confined to rudimentary learning at home among a small group of her friends. Shortly after arriving in St. Louis, she shared her desire to attend college and become a nurse. The team connected Farkhonda with English instructors, and over the course of six months, she learned the language. The next step in pursuing her HES is math, which Mary works with her on from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., Monday through Thursday. After class, she commutes to a nearby Wal-Mart, where she works a nine-hour shift as a cashier. Once Farkhonda passes her math exams, she will tackle reading, social studies, science and language.

Mary was looking for short-term volunteer opportunities at PRCE after retiring from her teaching career. Seventeen years later, she feels energized about the work each and every day. "Being part of a team that helps people put the pieces together to change their lives makes me feel so privileged," said Mary. "No one is doing this for the money. They do it because of the passion and determination we see in our students."

Program Coordinator Kristi Hernandez said they are working with about 50 students from Afghanistan and the feedback has been very positive. Students talk about how warm and kind the community reception has been and how sponsors have opened their homes and treated Afghans like members of their own family.



[Missouri Job Center](#) focuses on growing the state's economy by helping job seekers find gainful employment and providing businesses with a skilled, trained workforce to successfully compete in the global economy. Their team helps job seekers through every step of the process, including assessing skills, creating professional resumes, interview preparation, online job search capabilities through jobs.mo.gov, and on-the-job training.

The team also provides adult education and literacy workshops in classrooms across the city. In-demand positions in the area include IT, cybersecurity, transportation manufacturing and healthcare. The top five employers are BJC HealthCare, Washington University, Mercy, Boeing and SSM Health.

Staffers regularly organize job fairs across the region, helping match job seekers with leading businesses. Recent outreach includes encouraging younger workers to consider on-the-job training or apprenticeships with employers as an on-ramp to get into a career field and lay the groundwork for success.

Regional Manager Valerie Moore shared her passion, saying, "Helping people get ahead in their lives is my motivation. I love working with people and get so much joy seeing them move from where they are to where they want to be."

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For more than 100 years, [Affinia Healthcare](#) has provided primary and preventive health services to the residents of St. Louis. They offer a wide variety of in-demand services to their patients – from child development centers to mobile medical and dental services to food pantries and vaccination clinics. For women with gynecological and reproductive health needs, Affinia provides a “midwifery” program with full prenatal and postpartum care, newborn care and family planning. They also have weekly diaper giveaways for patients at their three area locations.



For students, they have embedded medical teams in three area schools to make it easier for families to access healthcare. This one-stop-shop approach helps increase the likelihood of attending appointments, lessens the burdens on parents and provides an opportunity to understand a wider range of factors impacting patient health. Soon, Affinia will add a fourth school and expand care to school staff and their families.

Since late 2021, the Affinia team has served more than 300 Afghan arrivals. By providing translation and transportation services, they have worked to remove barriers to access healthcare options. At the Support Center, the team focused on continuing to learn more about the needs of the Afghan population.

Vice President of Community Health and Engagement Sonia Deal knew she would be a nurse when she was 13. She and her mother came across two teens who had been in a serious car accident. Sonia just knew she had to do something, so she raced over to hold their hands while help was on the way. “I have such a passion for our community,” Sonia said. “I love touching the hearts of the families we serve and listening to what they need. This is my calling. With the help of my talented team, we come together every day to ensure we have the resources to get the job done.”



Samad drove from Iowa to the St. Louis Support Center with his wife and five children. The commute from his home was seven hours each way. He supported the U.S. military while in Afghanistan and needed urgent help with his case. USCIS officers were able to capture his biometrics and push his case forward. As he left with tears in his eyes, Samad thanked everyone, saying, “This is a happy and joyful day. Thank you so much for helping me and my family.”