

PEOPLE: Army leaders glimpse quality of life support for Afghans at Fort Lee

By Brian Stevens, Fort Lee PAO 26 October 2021



FORT LEE, Va. — “When I was tasked to support Task Force Eagle and Operation Allies Refuge [now Operation Allies Welcome], I got really excited,” recalled Lt. Col. Latorris Williams, officer in charge of the Life Support Area at Fort Lee where Afghan evacuees complete visa processing before resettlement in the U.S.

“What an honor to be a part of this history and make a difference in the lives of people who have sacrificed and helped us accomplish so much,” he further observed. Williams has been in charge of the LSA since the end of July when the first Afghans arrived here.

The Department of Defense — through U.S. Northern Command and in support of the Department of Homeland Security – is providing transportation, temporary housing, medical screening and general support for OAW. Fort Lee is one of several military installations across the country providing logistical support. According to a [Stars and Stripes article](#) published Oct. 25, nearly 6,700 Afghan evacuees have resettled

throughout the United States and about 55,150 remain at Stateside military bases.

The arrival of the immigrant visa applicants requires around-the-clock support, according to Williams. He said the determination of the LSA team and DHS representatives to put their best foot forward allows them to meet the demand, while maintaining a high level of morale.

“The team has taken the mission to heart — they want to make sure that when the Afghans arrive at Fort Lee, we provide a sustained level of high-quality support,” Williams said. “We want to make sure they feel welcome. It isn’t easy for them to up and move their families like this. So we do as much as possible to make them feel comfortable.”

The process of making them feel comfortable starts from the moment of arrival. Immediately after de-boarding the busses they arrive on, they receive a welcome brief from DOD and DHS staff members.

“They are given a badge and their room keys,” Williams said. “We help them with their bags and depending on what time they arrive, they may start the medical process to qualify for their visas the same day. It’s a really smooth system.”

The visa applicants have access to three halal meals a day in a cafeteria facility situated near their lodging area. There is also a “grab-and-go” station with 24-hour access.

Entertainment such as television and sports equipment also is available. Fort Lee’s Army.mil site and Facebook page has spotlighted many of the recreational and educational opportunities such as a youth soccer jamboree, museum tour, cultural classes, and a kebab cookout.

“They’re very appreciative,” Williams acknowledged. “They’re just floored to see what we have on display for them. All the feedback we’ve gotten on the accommodations and food has been really positive, which is great. They’ve also told us they feel like they are part of a new family, and that’s the goal.”

He recalled instances of elder Afghans coming up to him after the welcome brief and placing their hand over their hearts as a show of gratitude. Family members in the background would do the same. The gesture is one of the highest forms of respect and sincerity in Afghan culture.

The majority of Afghan special immigrants are staying at Fort Lee for several days. Despite the short timeframe, DOD personnel are working to make a lasting impression.

"I hope they leave here knowing we're sincere; that we're keeping our word," Williams said. "What they did for us, they didn't have to do. So, we repay them by doing this."

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