



ANNUAL REPORT – NEIGHBOR TO NEIGHBOR – WELCOMING AFGHAN IMMIGRANTS – July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023

Neighbor to Neighbor (formerly Homework Club) has been in operation since January 2019 and continues to welcome Afghan families new to the country or new to Northern Virginia. Four ACCA churches are involved and one representative from each church is on the Planning Team: John Calvin Presbyterian, Little River United Church of Christ, Peace Lutheran, and Ravensworth Baptist. Also serving on the Planning Team are two Afghans, who have lived in our area for several years. Volunteers from each church and other groups supply hands-on help with families.

Our goal has been to have gatherings two Saturdays a month at Peace Lutheran Church and to provide ongoing English classes via Zoom. During Saturday gatherings, participant adults can practice English, improve computer skills, receive resumé and job-hunting tips, and even practice driving. Children also work with volunteers, receive help with homework, play games, and younger children do arts and crafts.

Highlights from Saturday gatherings included, earlier this year, presentations by two women on the history of Thanksgiving and how it is celebrated in the U.S. This was no small feat as each one did research and then presented in English before the whole group. When they had arrived here fifteen months before that event, they spoke no English. Then, during the Martin Luther King holiday, we showed a video about King followed by small group discussion and questions. The Afghan adults shared their answers with the whole group in English. They also shared about some of their Afghan heroes.

Starting in January 2023, we noticed a drop in attendance for a variety of reasons. Families were settling into their new lives, had purchased cars, and were moving out of the area for less costly housing. In addition, many had jobs which required weekend hours, and children were involved in outside activities, too. We also learned that the State Department had reduced the number of Afghans being sent to this area due to the high cost of living and the large numbers already settled here. During the remainder of the fiscal year we offered two workshops for parents around the school system: “The Transition to Middle School” and “How to Work with Your Child’s School”. Fairfax County personnel led the sessions, which were well attended. A few new families who had moved here from other areas also participated.

A core piece of our program is teaching English to families. Our Afghan consultants teach two English classes, a lower-level and higher-level class each weekend, as well as a conversation class on Sundays. Students who are interested can be matched with a volunteer tutor who will meet with them on a regular basis to practice their English speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills. A few are mentors for a family or tutors for children. During the past year, fourteen folks have volunteered in these roles. In March the Planning Team met with tutors to share experiences and resources.

Special Events: In August 2022, the Interfaith Communities for Dialogue sponsored a picnic at Mason District Park for N2N families where backpacks and school supplies were presented to each child. Little River United Church of Christ provided the backpacks, while ICD provided the school supplies and wonderful food.

One of the highlights of the year was the Puppet Show, a holiday gift for all. The Afghan families as well as our volunteers, along with their children or grandchildren, were invited. Everyone joined in with enthusiasm – the puppeteers were so impressed with the Afghan children who had no trouble understanding the stories. It was simply great fun for all and an event that brought joy and peace during the holiday season.

In March 2023, we once again celebrated Nowruz in honor of the Afghan New Year. Both women and men dressed in their traditional colorful clothing and brought their favorite dishes to share. Volunteers brought drinks and desserts. Women in the English Classes made presentations on how Nowruz is celebrated in two different provinces in Afghanistan. It was a wonderful event.

The Future: We have learned that some new families might be coming to our area as humanitarian parolees, a status that does not provide permanent residency as of now. Their needs are great. Other families who have been here for a while are lacking information and skills needed to successfully transition to a new way of life. We are currently meeting with a newly formed non-profit headed by Afghans. We hope to partner with them by providing monthly, relevant in-person workshops, while continuing English classes and work with children.

Other highlights:

- 12 Saturday gatherings
- 20 Families served with 54 individuals (unduplicated count)
- 21 Volunteers (includes tutors)
- 14 tutors/mentors
- 76 English classes; High beginner and Intermediate (each class 90 minutes, plus preparation)
- 42 Conversation classes plus preparation
- \$2800 in gift cards to families
- Distributed emergency supplies and referred folks to other resources; job searching; help families find jobs
- Several Laptops provided

Impact:

- New immigrants have improved English skills, found jobs, purchased cars, improved housing
- Increased ability to navigate US culture
- Friendships formed within the Afghan community
- An increase in cross-cultural understanding
- Church volunteers have increased awareness of obstacles that immigrants face
- Some relationships between American and Afghan families have flourished

Planning Team: Marie Monsen, John Calvin Presbyterian Church; Janet Parsons Mackey, Little River United Church of Christ; Nadia Fitzcharles, Peace Lutheran Church; Carol weber, Ravensworth Baptist Church, and our consultants, Tahera Khavari and Zalmai Attarpoor.