

Aid Groups Expect Afghan Refugees To Resettle in Massachusetts

By Matt Murphy

State House News Service

With the United States' military evacuation of Afghanistan complete and some immigrant advocacy groups calling on the state to make money available to support refugees, Gov. Charlie Baker said Monday he has spoken to the federal government about being "as helpful as we can be, when we need to be."

Baker also offered his condolences to the family of Marine Sgt. Johanny Rosario Pichardo, one of the U.S. military members killed in last week's attack on the airport in Kabul.

Rosario, 25, was among the 13 service members and 169 Afghans killed when a suicide bomber detonated explosives outside Hamid Karzai International Airport where the United States had been evacuating citizens and allies as the 20-year war comes to an end.

Rosario was a native of Lawrence and served with with the Naval Amphibious Force, Task Force 51/5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, according to the Associated Press. Since her identity was confirmed over the weekend, condolences from state leaders have been pouring in.

"There's no question that these people were selfless, there's no question that they were heroes, and there's no question that they and their fellow servicemen and women are among the very best of what this country has to offer and we should always honor, always respect and never forget the loss that they've incurred as a result of their service," Baker said.

Baker said her death had to be particularly painful for Rosario's family knowing how close she was to leaving Afghanistan.

"I can't imagine what it must be like to be a family member of somebody who was on the ground at the so-called end of this process when you think and start to believe that your family member is going to be coming home any minute now at the end of this ordeal and to have them lost to a suicide bomber," Baker said Monday, at a press conference from a school in Everett.

The governor said he had spoken with Lawrence Mayor Kendrys Vasquez who had spoken with Rosario's family.

"I made clear to him that if there's anything we can do to assist the family or the community with respect to the arrangements and the process going forward, we would do whatever we could to be helpful," Baker said.

Baker comments came hours before the last U.S. military flight full of supplies and remaining service members departed Kabul ahead of the Aug. 31 deadline for the evacuation from Afghanistan to be completed. With the Taliban now in control of the country, the United States and international allies had been scrambling to quickly evacuate, military and civilian personnel from the country, including Afghan nationals who helped support the U.S. military mission there for two decades.

Baker has previously stated that Massachusetts would welcome refugees from Afghanistan, and he said Monday his administration has had initial conversations with the federal government.

"They're currently going through their own process. Everybody who comes into this country has to go through a federal review of one type or another, but we and a number of the organizations that have historically been in this line of work have made clear to them that we stand ready to help them when

asked," Baker said.

Some groups, including the International Institute of New England and Ascentria Care Alliance, said late last week that hundreds of Afghan evacuees could begin arriving in Massachusetts as soon as Sept. 1, and it could take months before they are able to obtain work permits.

The nonprofits said Baker and the Legislature should make federal American Rescue Plan Act funds or money from the state's fiscal 2021 surplus, which has yet to be allocated, available to provide services to those Afghans seeking to relocate in Massachusetts.

"Individuals arriving in Massachusetts, especially those arriving quickly and as humanitarian parolees need strong wraparound services including housing, legal assistance, childcare, and job training," said Aimee Mitchell, chief of community service for Ascentria.

Mitchell said the federal government will supply some funding to accompany humanitarian parolees, but not enough to cover the full cost of their resettlement in a state like Massachusetts, where affordable housing can be particularly scarce.

Just a few weeks ago, Emma Tobin, chief programs officer at the International Institute of New England, said it was too soon to tell how many evacuees from Afghanistan would look to resettle in Massachusetts or when, but she said existing and former Afghan clients have reached out to say their families are working through the processes to travel to the U.S.

"We are preparing for the likelihood that Afghan families will be arriving in Massachusetts, and that we'll be serving them," Tobin said. "But without travel notifications, without people showing up at our offices with documents, it's just really impossible to estimate a number or to put a timeline on it."

The organization, which offers myriad resettlement services, has accepted about 330 Afghan families since 2014, with a good number heading to Lowell.

[Chris Van Buskirk contributed reporting]