

Rhode Island Refugees: We Are Living in Fear

Representatives of the Providence-based Refugee Dream Center and local refugee community speak out in response to President Trump's immigration crackdown.

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by [Lauren Clem](https://www.rimonthly.com/bios/lauren-clem/) (<https://www.rimonthly.com/bios/lauren-clem/>)



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Teddi Jallow, executive director of the Refugee Dream Center, addresses reporters outside the Providence non-profit. (Photo by Lauren Clem)

Members of Rhode Island's refugee community, including Afghan refugees, gathered outside the [Refugee Dream Center](https://www.refugee-dreamcenter.org/) (<https://www.refugee-dreamcenter.org/>) in Providence on Wednesday to condemn last week's National Guard shooting and the ensuing immigration crackdown by President Donald Trump.

Rahmanullah Lakanwal, an Afghan national who worked with the United States government in Afghanistan before emigrating, has been accused of shooting two National Guard members in Washington D.C., killing Sarah Beckstrom and seriously injuring Andrew Wolfe. The incident has inflamed an already fraught situation for local immigrants, many of whom face uncertain status amid the rapid policy changes by the Trump administration.

"We extend our deepest condolence to [the victims'] family and our prayers are with them," says Teddi Jallow, executive director of the Refugee Dream Center. "In moments like this, it is easy for fear to be turned into blame. And unfortunately, hateful rhetoric coming from Washington D.C. has made that work."

"But we must be clear. One person's actions do not define an entire community."

Jallow [spoke with Rhode Is](#)
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Since last week's attack, Trump has renewed his anti-immigrant comments in meetings and online, halting processing of Afghan immigrants as well as those from other countries and raising questions about the status of those already here. Some 200,000 Afghan immigrants have entered the U.S. in recent years, many of them under a special immigrant visa for those who worked with the U.S. government during the two-decade-long war in Afghanistan.

"That is not constitutional, and this is not who we are as Americans. Protecting refugees and respecting human rights has always been part of democracy," Jallow says.

"Every person who comes to this country deserves dignity, fairness and the protection of our laws," she continues. "Because that is what makes America great."

Jallow and her husband, Omar Bah, founded the center after their own experience immigrating to the United States from The Gambia. Bah had been a journalist in his home country, where he was arrested and tortured following critical reporting on the regime.

Bah echoed Jallow's remarks on Wednesday, also condemning Trump's recent comments about Somali immigrants. During a Cabinet meeting earlier this week, the president referred to people from Somalia as "garbage" who "we don't want them in our country."

"It's racist, and it's an incitement of violence against that community. Somebody can wake up and think of doing harm to that community because of the statements of the president," Bah says.

He added that many local refugees are living in fear as a result of the president's remarks and recent anti-immigrant actions by his administration, especially those from Afghanistan and Somalia.

"Some of them are not even leaving their homes right now because they feel they will be targeted because of how they look or because of their country of origin," Bah says. "We feel that is wrong. No American should feel like that."

Representatives of the center were joined by Amin Faqiry, a former Afghan interpreter who immigrated to Rhode Island with his wife and family in 2021. Faqiry, who worked with the U.S. military in Afghanistan for more than ten years, was admitted to the country under a special immigrant visa. He and his wife live in Cranston with their six children, two of whom were born in the United States.

"We call on President Donald Trump and immigration and ICE to let those alone who are here legally in this country," he says. "Don't call us illegal immigrants. We are legal. We are trying to make a living. We are trying to make a good life."

Faqiry said the recent anti-immigrant sentiment has made it difficult for students in schools who feel they're being looked down upon in the community. Thankfully, he says, his family has not experienced any harassment as Afghans since last week's attacks.

"We have been warmly welcomed to Rhode Island, and we love being here, and we call America our home," he says.

According to Bah, there are about 600 Afghan immigrants in Rhode Island, along with a sizable Somali population. The organization's refugee re-settlement program has been completely shut down since last January, with the exception of some South Africans of Afrikaner ethnicity who were exempt from the federal resettlement pause.

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