



Special Session Report

2021

With the passage of SB 5561, Oregon builds on a long tradition of welcoming refugees.

Governor Kate Brown convened the legislature in December 2021 for a special session focused on replenishing Oregon's rent assistance fund and extending the eviction protections established as part of the state's COVID-19 response. The session also provided an opportunity for lawmakers to take up other matters deemed too pressing to wait for the regularly scheduled short session in February 2022. Among those pressing matters is the anticipated arrival in Oregon of thousands of Afghan refugees – nearly 600 of whom are expected to arrive before March 2022 – and the need for state investment to support their resettlement and help them rebuild their lives.

The United States is currently coordinating the relocation of more than 70,000 people following their evacuation from Afghanistan. Oregon has a long tradition of welcoming refugees and has committed to resettling 1,200 Afghan arrivals, but existing federal funding is not adequate to support these efforts. Senator Kayse Jama and Representative Khanh Pham, both Portland-area Democrats, have called for a compassionate and proactive response to evacuated Afghan allies, urging the state to address the funding gap and create a strong foundation for refugees' futures in Oregon.

ODHS director Fariborz Pakseresht agrees. "We know that Afghan families and individuals coming to Oregon have experienced trauma," he said. "We must be mindful that Afghan arrivals have left behind friends, family, cherished homes, and established businesses to start a new life. They will become our neighbors, co-workers, and productive members of our communities. We owe it to them to make their first days, weeks, and months in Oregon as stress-free as possible, connecting them to quality and easy-to-navigate resources, from meals to job supports to connections with faith-based organizations."

The legislature convened on December 13, and four bills were passed by the end of the daylong session, securing a combined \$215 million for efforts ranging from rental assistance and housing services to drought response efforts and illegal marijuana market enforcement. The package also includes a General Fund appropriation of \$18 million to Oregon Department of Human Services in support of Afghan refugee resettlement services.

With the newly secured funds, ODHS Office of Resilience and Emergency Management will be able to provide short-term food and shelter to individuals and families arriving from Afghanistan, and Self Sufficiency Programs will work with the state's network of refugee resettlement agencies to provide case management services, rental assistance, immigration and legal services, and interpretation classes.

Claire Seguin, deputy director of ODHS Self-Sufficiency Programs and the state's refugee coordinator, said that the legislature's support for Afghan refugee services mirrors a commitment that's evident around the state. "The state of Oregon has really stepped up to meet the needs of individuals and families from Afghanistan. We began this year with three partner resettlement agencies, and now we have five. The level of commitment and the outpouring of community support has been astounding, in addition to the refugee support network that already existed."

"This funding, paired with so much thoughtful planning, allows us to channel that commitment into real supports for Afghan arrivals," she said.

Key Legislation

SB 5561: Relating to state financial administration and declaring an emergency

Affected ODHS units: Self-Sufficiency Programs and Office of Resilience and Emergency Management

Outcome: Passed

Effective date: Effective upon passage

Senate Bill 5561 was introduced by Senator Peter Courtney (D-Salem) and Representative Cedric Hayden (R-Roseburg) and makes a General Fund appropriation of \$18,238,662 to ODHS for a one-time, 12-month package of support for up to 1,200 Afghan individuals and families paroled into the United States through the U.S. State Department's Afghan Placement and Assistance program. The package includes:

- \$5,362,590 for short-term food and shelter, and staffing
- \$2,914,286 for case management services,
- \$5,961,600 for rental assistance,
- \$807,600 for culturally specific food assistance and interpretation classes, and
- \$2,890,000 for immigration and legal services.

Also included is \$ 302,586 for two limited-duration Operations and Policy Analyst 3 positions (1.17 FTE) in the Office of Self-Sufficiency Programs to assist with coordination of long-term housing and the development of a statewide, culturally specific refugee support infrastructure.

All 2021 second special session bills are available on the Oregon State Legislature website:

https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/listbills/2021S2SessionBills.html

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