

With their charitable organization, Meghan Markle and Prince Harry began a new **project** this year aimed at fostering "a sense of belonging" for resettled **Afghan** women in Milwaukee and 10 other hubs across the country.

The **project** was publicly announced this week through the Impact Report of the couple's charitable Archewell Foundation.

They launched The Welcome **Project**, which is intended to support "women-led programming for recently resettled **Afghan** women to help build more inclusive and connected communities."

"We know that when women are well resourced and empowered to direct their own futures, they not only build a better life for themselves, but also dramatically improve the lives of those around them, their families, and their communities," the report said. "In other words, supporting women means supporting communities."

Depending on the location, programming can include sewing, art, hiking, swimming, photography, storytelling and cooking, the report said. There's also a Welcome Dinner component, so participants can share a meal together.

In Milwaukee, the new initiative meant the continuation of a sewing and wellness get-together for resettled **Afghan** women that's held once a week during the school year.

It was launched in 2022 by Marquette University professor, researcher and author Louise Cainkar, an expert on immigrants and refugees, and the Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition, led by Janan Najeeb.

"We're building community, we're providing them a safe space to talk about the challenges they face, to make friends," Cainkar said. "It removes them from being isolated."

What the get-togethers entail, provide

Refugee resettlement in the U.S. mainly focuses on jobs, housing and English language services, Cainkar said, and not so much on women, children, mental health, parenting and building community.

"Here they are in a new country with their family," she said. "They've endured a lot of trauma. And, they don't live near anyone they know. So, how do you build community under those circumstances?"

That's where Cainkar and the MMWC's "Trauma-Informed Restorative Circles **Project**" comes in, which was initially made possible through funds from Welcome Debt. U.S., Cainkar said.

The **project's** first get-together was held around September 2022, and they've continued weekly — during the school year — ever since.

Once a week, a bus picks up over a dozen resettled **Afghan** women, several of whom reside on the south side, plus their children, Cainkar said. There are two groups of women that alternate every other week.

They're taken to Hamilton High School, which is lent to the group through a Milwaukee Public Schools program, Cainkar noted.

Through its Be-a-Buddy Program, the MMWC provides programming for the kids, including art, science, English and games.

For the women, the outing starts with the restorative activity of sewing. All materials, including fabric and the school's sewing machines, are provided.

"The women make whatever they want," Cainkar said. "They make clothes for themselves, they make clothes for the children, their spouses."

About two hours in, the women take a break and gather in "restorative circles" with a facilitator who's trained in restorative practices.

The hourlong session is intended to give women a safe and comfortable environment to talk about their daily life, seek advice, especially on parenting, address issues they may be facing and share their joys, as well as their sorrows, Cainkar said.

Often the women — who are from different parts of Afghanistan — don't want to talk much because what they've gone through "still weighs very heavy," she said.

"They lost brothers, they lost husbands, they lost children," Cainkar shared. Some still have family members back in Afghanistan and are dealing with "ongoing trauma of family separation."

"They don't have to explain things 10 times to us," Cainkar said. "We understand. We understand trauma, we understand war, we understand refugees, we understand your culture. We respect you ... There's all these kind of cultural connections that provide a real sense of comfort for women in a society that's totally different from where they came."

The women wrap up the day with more sewing. Also during the event, participants have lunch and can receive referrals to other programs they may need, Cainkar said.

"Our **project** really is a model for the country," Cainkar said. "It's not just doing art or sewing or whatever. Those things are important, but it has this very specific mental health, wellness component to it that I think is pretty unique."

Where The Welcome **Project** comes in

Needing financial support to keep the **project** going, Cainkar submitted a proposal to "The Welcome **Project**" this past spring.

When she got word that it had been accepted at the beginning of the summer, she was "very excited and very proud."

In accordance with The Welcome **Project's** wishes, a cooking day, where the women will be able to cook and eat together, will be implemented, Cainkar said. The details are still being ironed out.

How did The Welcome **Project** come about?

According to the foundation's Impact Report, two years ago, Prince Harry and Markle visited displaced **Afghan** families who were living on a joint military base in New Jersey.

When speaking with the women there, Markle learned that they not only needed basics, but a space to build community, cook and talk.

She was reminded of how the Hubb Community Kitchen, a group near and dear to her, was created so women could gather to make meals after the Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017, when 72 people died.

Inspired by their New Jersey visit, the Archewell Foundation began working with partners to help address the needs of families resettling in the U.S., the report said.

When they continuously heard of the "intense social isolation" the women in these communities were facing, they wanted to find a way to combat that, too.

Hence, The Welcome **Project** was born.

By facilitating programming, the **project** "also brings access to critical resources, educational opportunities, workforce development, employment, and entrepreneurship," according to the report.

How you can help

The Milwaukee **project's** "biggest challenge" is fabric, Cainkar said. About \$1,000 a month goes toward that, she said.

If anyone is interested in donating fabric or sponsoring a fabric donation, email Cainkar at louise.cainkar@marquette.edu or the MMWC, Cainkar said.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Hannah Kirby, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 'Royals' foundation starts project to help Afghan women', *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (online), 16 Dec 2023 A2 <<https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/195F5F2C4ED12EB0>>

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