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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update By Senator Howard Marklein September 3, 2021

Wisconsin Hospitality at Fort McCoy

Thousands of refugees from Afghanistan have arrived at Fort McCoy. The base currently has capacity for approximately 13,000 people and they expect to continue receiving new visitors for a while.

I, along with several of my colleagues in the Wisconsin legislature who represent districts near Fort McCoy, visited with Major General Darrell Guthrie, Senior Commander at Fort McCoy and Commanding General of the Army Reserve's 88th Readiness Division on Wednesday, August 25, 2021. He is overseeing all of the operations at Fort McCoy. Our goal was to understand the mission, ask questions and share the concerns of our constituents. Since my visit, I have been monitoring the mission at Fort McCoy and asking additional questions. I want to share what I have learned with you.

During my visit, we received a thorough briefing from Maj. Gen. Guthrie, the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security and members of Guthrie's team. We took a driving tour of Fort McCoy to observe the operations and I saw many families playing in the yards around the barracks and on the playgrounds. I saw busy laundromats, people hanging laundry to dry and walking around the base talking on cell phones and with each other. I saw people rebuilding their lives. I saw relief.

I know there are a lot of questions and concerns about the refugees at Fort McCoy. First and foremost, we must remember that the vast majority of the refugees helped us in Afghanistan. Their lives were at risk. Their families were threatened. And our nation should offer a safe place to land. I cannot imagine what it would be like to leave my home, with very few possessions and flee to another country without knowing what the future will hold; but that is what a lot of these people did.

Maj. Gen. Guthrie and his team at Fort McCoy learned about this significant mission only 10 days before the first Afghan refugees arrived. However, the Army ramped up very quickly and have brought in more than 1,000 soldiers from other parts of the country to meet the needs of the mission. They were more than ready and continue to be well-supplied to perform their duties.

Most of the refugees who arrive at Fort McCoy are initially entering the United States through Dulles International Airport in Dulles, Virginia. They meet with United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents upon arrival to be processed before they board another plane for Volk Field in Wisconsin. From Volk Field, they take buses to Fort McCoy.

Every individual is tested for COVID-19 two times before they arrive at Fort McCoy and then one additional time upon arrival. If they test positive, they are provided quarantined space to recover. Every individual is also offered opportunity for vaccination. According to my sources, a very small percentage of refugees have tested positive for COVID-19.

In addition to COVID-19 testing, all refugees are given a thorough medical exam and provided medical care at Fort McCoy, including other vaccines, medications and treatments. They are provided with hot meals, sundries and supplies.

Families are housed together and separated from other families in the barracks. Single men and single women have separate accommodations. According to my sources, they have ample laundry and dining facilities to serve everyone who has arrived so far and many more to come.

The Red Cross, Team Rubicon and Catholic Charities of the LaCrosse Diocese are the main points of contact to coordinate donations and volunteers. I was recently told that they particularly need warm clothes and blankets for babies and children. As the weather gets cooler, they are looking for warm pajamas, blankets and seasonal clothing for fall.

Please visit <https://cclse.org/afghanistan-refugee-assistance/> for the list of items they will accept and for links to online gift registries. Donations can be dropped off at Catholic Charities - 3710 East Avenue South in La Crosse, Monday-Friday, 9-11 am and 1-3 pm.

The State Department is coordinating all relocation services for the refugees. They are working with each individual or family to identify people or places in the United States where they may have connections, including veterans with whom they may have served.

According to my contacts, it is highly unlikely that many refugees will remain in Wisconsin. The State Department's goal is to relocate people quickly within 14-21 days of arrival. This is why, at this time, we do not expect Afghan children to be enrolled in our local schools or for many Afghan refugees to be relocated to communities near Fort McCoy. A national news story recently listed 19 major cities throughout the country that will likely become home to refugees. There are several national non-profit organizations that work with the State Department to provide relocation options for refugees.

Throughout this process we must remain vigilant and focused on the goal of the mission at Fort McCoy: to provide temporary housing and support for vulnerable Afghans in support of Operation Allies Refuge. I have shared my concerns about security and thorough vetting with the leadership on the base. We must be perfect in order to protect the integrity of this mission. I know that nearly every refugee we are welcoming to the United States is here with the best intentions. But it takes only one person with nefarious plans to damage the entire mission and cast suspicion on thousands of good people.

I appreciate the hard work, effort, compassion and hospitality that the men and women at Fort McCoy are providing to thousands every day. If you are able to contribute, donate or volunteer, please consider participating in this effort. It is a great opportunity to extend Wisconsin hospitality to those who need it most.

For more information and to connect with me, visit my website <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/17/marklein> and subscribe to my weekly E-Update by sending an email to Sen.Marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov. Do not hesitate to call 608-266-0703 if you have input, ideas or need assistance with any state-related matters.

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