

**U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell**

**Afghanistan Safe Passage Press Conference with Jewish Family Services**

**Participants: Rabbi Will Berkovitz, Alan Cohn**

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**CANTWELL:** Well, thank you very much. And thank you for everybody who is listening in. I want to first thank Rabbi Berkovitz and the organizations that he's been working with, because they've been diligent now for months at continuing to not only help pull people out of Afghanistan, but to continue to communicate so that people don't forget that we still have friends and families there that need our help and support. So just thank you so much to you and Jewish Family Services in addition for all the advocacy and support for these individual families.

You're right, we did send a letter with our colleagues, Senator Blumenthal, Feinstein, Van Hollen, Whitehouse, Warren, Murray, Wyden, Booker, Heinrich, Smith, and Reed to try to communicate to the administration, actually, Senator Cardin was also one of the first people that I talked to about this letter and sought his counsel on support and getting this done.

The reason why we sent the letter is we know that we still have many people in Afghanistan that are stuck there, and they need the U.S.'s continued help and support. We're talking about some American citizens, we're talking about immigrant visa holders, we're talking about journalists, including Voice of America, and we're talking about others that are still NGO contractors who worked for the U.S. Embassy, or for humanitarian programs, or work with Jewish Family Services, or others, and weren't evacuated by that August 31st deadline.

Since that time period, besides working with Rabbi Berkovitz and others, we've been contacted by many people. I think in my office alone has 1,800 open cases of individuals that we are trying to help and support. So as we worked through this with the State Department, and obviously, they have a very big challenge, you can see some of the information that's coming out of the hearing that's been had in the Senate over the last day and a half. Some of the questions and focus my colleagues are trying to get at this, who specifically, you know, is in charge?

I know the military that have been testifying say that they are helping in support of this effort, but they're not the ultimate person in charge. They're just helping with the evacuation when the evacuation is realized. So we want to continue to have the assistance and try to valiantly bring as many of these people as we can out of Afghanistan. We were successful in helping an individual who had been an interpreter, he lost an eye due to violence, the Taliban lost several members of his family, but we were able to get him evacuated into another country and hopefully, eventually to the United States.

So these are the types of people that we are trying to help. And to get their safe passage, we need to know that we have somebody that we can continue to work with, that we all can communicate with. We know the level of security and the challenge of having to work very quietly in some instances here. But we need to make clear that we need to have an envoy or something like that,

that the groups and organizations, and we on Capitol Hill even who are dealing with this much caseload, can have a point of contact with somebody who can continue to help bring focus and attention to this. So we want to continue to work with our colleagues on this.

My sense is this isn't really a partisan issue. This is both sides of the aisle. Everybody would like us to do something to help establish the fact that we are going to help those who help us and hopefully we'll be able to do that. So thank you all very much for joining us today.