

The Role of Behavioral Health: Practicing Presence and Ambassadorship during Operation Allies Welcome with ▶ Transitioning Afghan Travelers

MAJ Lois Colwell, LICSW

Disclaimer

- ▶ The thoughts and opinions shared in this presentation are my own and do not represent the DoD or the U.S. Army.

Learning Objectives

Understand	Understand challenges of Afghan travelers
Learn	Learn importance of safety and basic needs
Recognize	Recognize the role and value of social workers
Understand	Understand the power of presence
Learn	Learn the value of connection in healing
Understand	Understand our roles as ambassadors

Definitions

- ▶ Non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) is the ordered (mandatory) or authorized (voluntary) departure of civilian noncombatants and non-essential military personnel from danger in an overseas country to a designated safe haven, typically within the continental United States.
- ▶ Operations are conducted to evacuate generally due to deteriorating security situations.

Definitions

- ▶ Refugee is a person who is outside of their home country and is unable or unwilling to return home due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons such as race, religion, nationality, social group, political opinion, etc. (Geneva Convention, 1951).
- ▶ Usually living in bordering country.

Definitions

- ▶ During Operation Allies Welcome, Afghans are referred to as *travelers*.
- ▶ Terminology carefully used due to uncertainty of Special Immigration Visa program status which had not been determined. Terms such as “migrants” and “refugees” not used.
- ▶ Iran and Pakistan host the most Afghan refugees globally (1.3 million).

Afghanistan Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) August 2021



Afghanistan Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) August 2021



Challenges

- ▶ Left in haste and in terror.
- ▶ Chaotic process in accessing travel, threatened by or victim of violence
- ▶ Separated from family members
- ▶ Language barriers
- ▶ Documentation
- ▶ Hypervigilance/fear
- ▶ Minimal supplies of clothing, baby items

Transitional Environment



Transitional Environment



Challenges

- ▶ New daily routines
- ▶ Boredom
- ▶ Changes in diet (unfamiliar foods)
- ▶ Interpersonal and family violence
- ▶ Lack of structure for children and families
- ▶ Grief/Loss

Transitional Environment



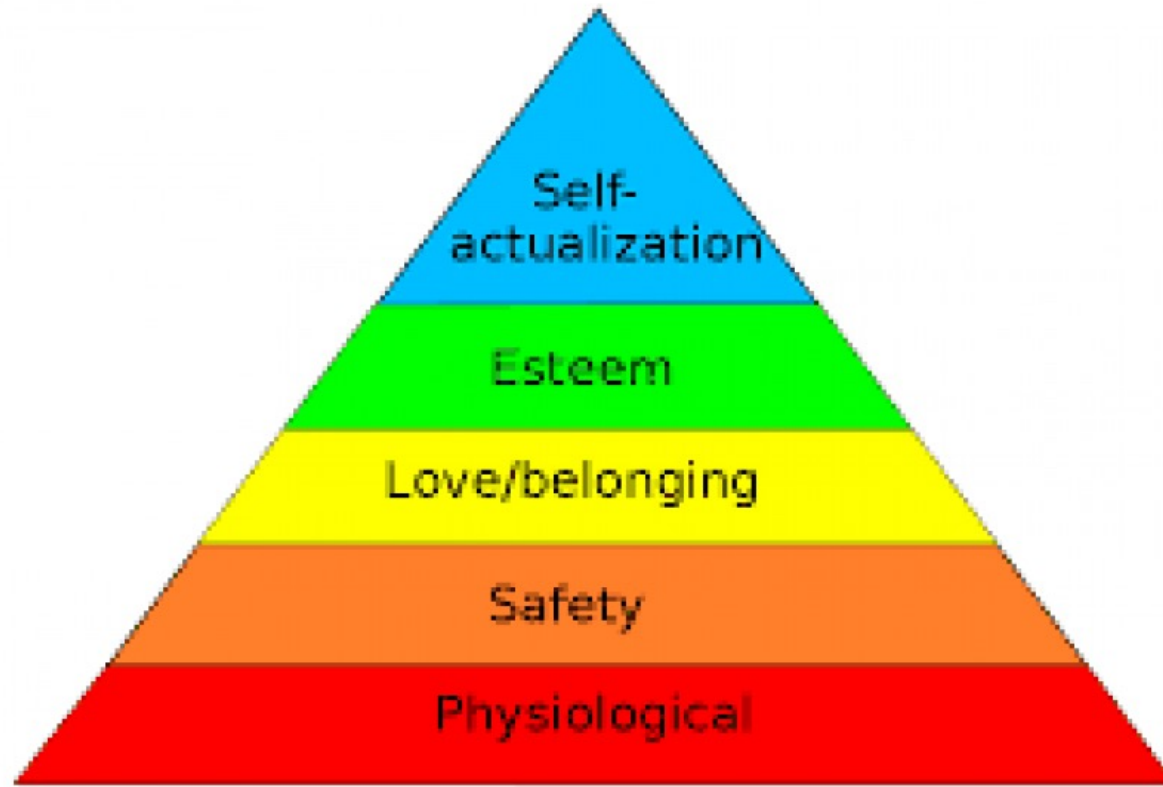
Challenges of Transition

- ▶ Learning new language
- ▶ Real time updates from loved ones
- ▶ Social isolation
- ▶ Different cultural norms for genders and families
- ▶ Stigma in accessing behavioral health
- ▶ Measles outbreak requiring longer stay
- ▶ COVID

Transitional Environment



Maslow's Hierarchy Needs



Physiological & Safety

- ▶ Shelter.
- ▶ Water. Hoarding
- ▶ Food. Hoarding
- ▶ Sleep areas
- ▶ Clothing. Minimal. Lack of suitcases or bags to travel.
- ▶ Religious/faith needs
- ▶ Difficult to build rapport and establish safety unless physical needs are met.

Love/Belonging

- ▶ For many, there was sense of betrayal in their communities. Trusted people were aligned with Taliban and unknowingly were waiting to take over.
- ▶ For some, sense of betrayal from U.S.
- ▶ Feelings of isolation and mistrust.
- ▶ Important to build rapport and trust and facilitate building social connections.

Challenges of Transition

- ▶ High rates of emotional distress during transition with little to no information of what the future life will look like.
- ▶ Headaches, heart palpitations, panic attacks, feeling jittery, decreased appetite, difficulty sleeping, physical weakness, episodes of paralysis.

Challenges of Transition



Grief/Loss

- ▶ Country, home, village
- ▶ Leaving family members behind
- ▶ Family members killed before leaving
- ▶ Left in haste with little time to prepare
- ▶ Familiarity - routine and rhythms of daily life
- ▶ Food
- ▶ Identity in community/village

Healing

- ▶ Establish afternoon tea groups with assistance of interpreters. Groups for those pregnant, older and younger females of many who were unaccompanied.
- ▶ Stories of the past, present circumstances and looking to future.

Benefits of Afternoon Tea Groups

- ▶ Familiarity of cultural drinks and food
- ▶ Privacy
- ▶ Identifying commonalities
- ▶ Sharing stories
- ▶ Focusing on future, identifying other's strengths
- ▶ Building connection for support
- ▶ Being heard and understood
- ▶ Sense of belonging

Afternoon Tea Groups



Afternoon Tea Groups



Healing

- ▶ Focus on basic needs
- ▶ To be present and be a witness
- ▶ Find ways to establish culturally normative rhythms and routines to establish sense of belonging, identity and hope

Cultural Humility

- ▶ Our own social location of power and privilege as social work professionals
- ▶ Relationship of safety, trust and collaboration based on the unique needs of each person
- ▶ Experience of significant trauma, oppression and violence by those in roles of authority
- ▶ Respecting and including the elders

Cultural Humility

- ▶ Negative media portrayals of refugees viewed on spectrum of dangerous and victimized
- ▶ Biased views can result in not identifying cultural strengths, healing and resilient practices
- ▶ Awareness to not project Western culture coping practices onto a different cultural background
- ▶ Recognize individuals have unique stories and experiences
- ▶ Shifting from individual focus to family and community focus

Cultural Humility

- ▶ Focus of female Afghan travelers are raising children, caring for family members and cooking
- ▶ Social connections with other women
- ▶ Hygiene practices important to religion and husband's preferences.
- ▶ Family is central to their lives and their identity

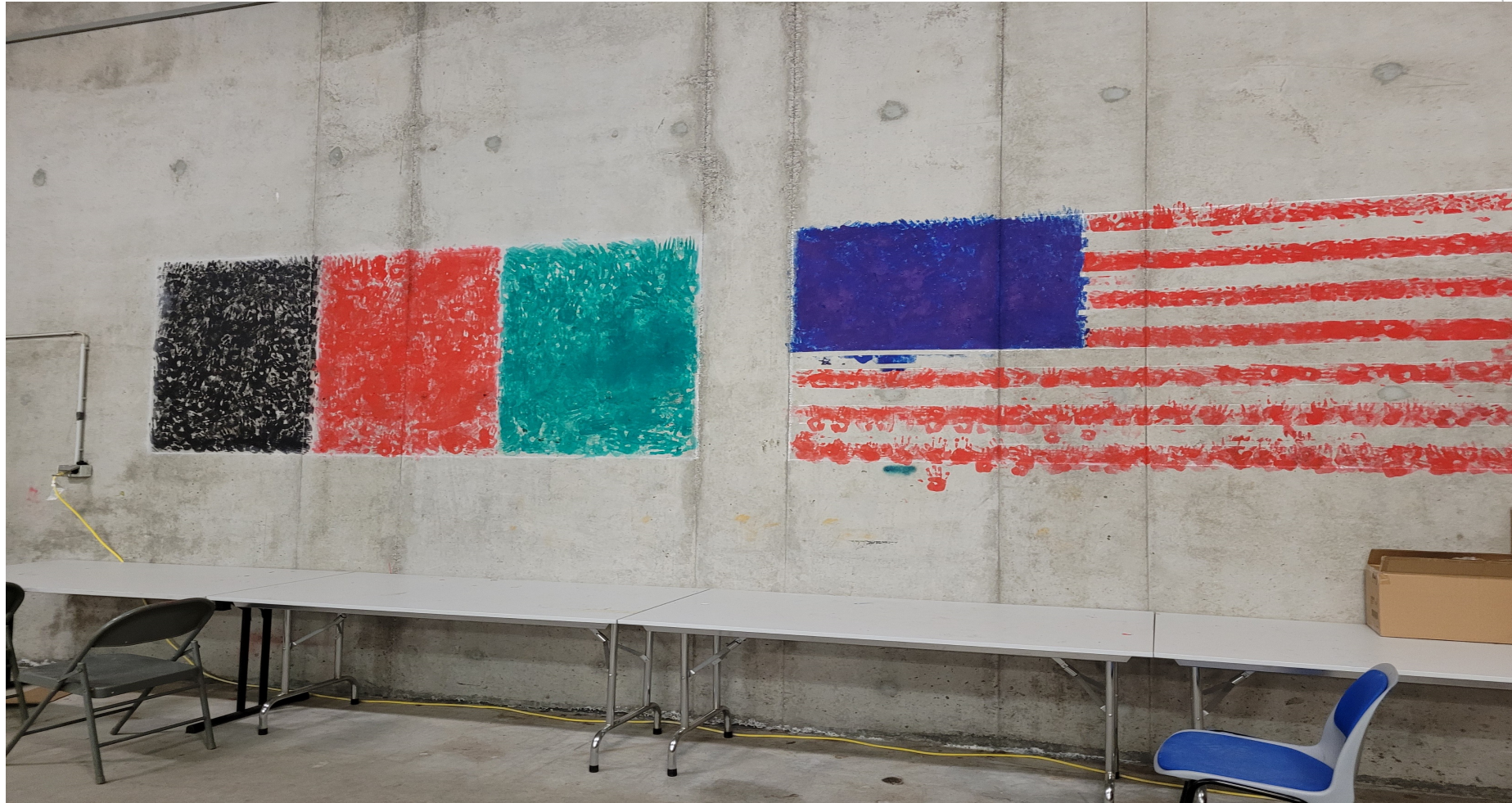
Being an Ambassador

- ▶ Being a representative of the U.S. and of the social work profession
- ▶ Maintain high level of ethical presence and professionalism
- ▶ Advising other professionals and specialties on needs of the travelers, e.g. need to have access to familiar food, education on importance of cultural sensitivity
- ▶ Making a difference in their experience

Lessons Learned

- ▶ Be present, engage in walk-about
- ▶ Listen to understand
- ▶ Provide as much information as appropriate. Do not overwhelm with information
- ▶ Be careful not to send message of Western culture and traditions are superior
- ▶ Work with elders and interpreters
- ▶ Learn a few greeting words in their language
- ▶ Focus on the hopeful

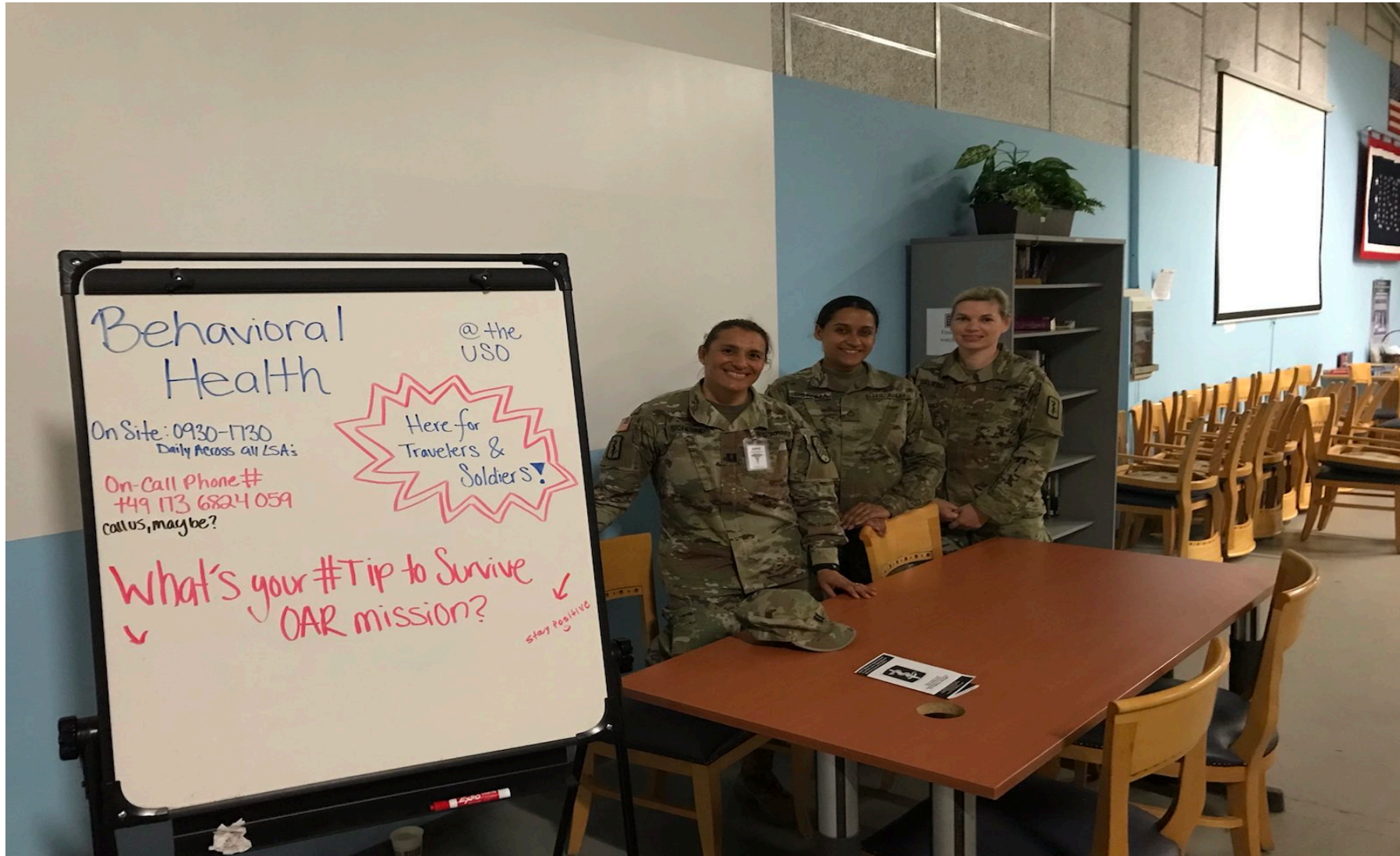
AUG - NOV 2021



AUG - NOV 2021



AUG - NOV 2021



Questions



Sources

- ▶ Aten, Jamie D. and Hwang, Jenny. *Refugee Mental Health*. American Psychological Association. Washington D.C., 2021
- ▶ Hilado, Aimee and Lundy, Marta. *Models for Practice with Immigrants & Refugees, Collaboration, Cultural Awareness and Integrative Theory*. Los Angeles, CA. 2018