

Organization Name: Afghan Advantage

Date of Interview: April 10, 2025

Organization Interviewees: Sherry Lowe, ED; Sarah Jacobsen, Outreach Director; and 11 staff and students

Impact 100 GRT Interviewers: Gretchen Boehm, Andrea Radosevich

Application Link: <https://2025grt.softtr.app/glt-applications-detail?recordId=recISwAf7NNaJsFPh>

Organization mission: Nurture Communication, Self-Reliance, Literacy and Leadership by Building Community Connections Through Increased Access to Information, Experiences, and Targeted Life Skills.

What does the organization do? Afghan Advantage: Empowering Women, Building Community Founded in 2023, and led by Afghan women and their Washington neighbors, Afghan Advantage (AA+) is dedicated to newcomer success and belonging. Washington has welcomed 23,102 Afghan allies since 2018, with King County among the top four resettlement areas in the U.S. At AA+, educated Afghan women lead the way, designing solutions for thousands of pre-literate Afghan women and those with limited English and education. Through literacy, self-reliance, and community engagement initiatives, AA+ fosters communication, self-advocacy, and meaningful connections. This lays the foundation for lifelong learning and a fulfilling life.

Pods Literacy: Practical Skills for Daily Life is an in-house designed program that helps the 50% of students who have zero literacy in their native language. They do not know their birthdate, how to count or read. In Afghanistan, women have the world's lowest literacy rate (22%) and rank last in human rights and it is unlawful for women to work, study, speak, shop, or travel.

Pods Literacy provides students with essential practical skills for everyday life: Learning to read, write, and communicate personal information, tell time, make appointments, use public transit, and navigate libraries. The program also includes basic digital literacy and math skills, focusing on money management. Field trips to libraries, grocery stores, and bus routes help reinforce participants' independence in real-world situations.

Pods Literacy creates personalized, site-specific learning cohorts for Afghan women and girls, meeting them exactly where they are with culturally specific, functional literacy modules, students build key skills in English language, phonics, writing and reading fluency, and basic math, through real-world applications. It prepares students to participate successfully in traditional English Language Learning (ELL) Level 1 classes at community colleges.

All classes are taught by native Dari, Pashto, and English speakers for maximum effectiveness. Students say they learn more in 10 weeks than in a whole year in traditional ELL classes.

With 24/7 access to Dari/Pashto-speaking teachers through WhatsApp groups, students can get immediate assistance. This approach has fostered a network of empowered women united through learning and community. Literacy is viewed as a means to build confidence, self-reliance, and leadership.

Who does the organization serve? AA+ culturally specific programs for thousands of Afghan women and girls in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties, many of whom face low literacy in their native language, no English proficiency, social isolation, and systemic discrimination rooted in Taliban-imposed gender apartheid. They are trailblazers with a passion to learn and contribute. AA+ exists to support their journey to independence and empowerment.

What inequity is the organization addressing and how does the organization address it? Thousands of Afghan women and girls in Washington face challenges in language and literacy, with limited access to culturally

appropriate English Language Learning (ELL) programs. Many struggle in traditional classes, often repeating levels without gaining essential reading and writing skills. Functional literacy is crucial for their success.

Social isolation affects the mental and physical health of these women, who often have little experience engaging with their community independently. AA+ aims to create neighborhood-based learning communities that foster support networks, reducing isolation through functional literacy.

Daily life is challenging without literacy and English skills, impacting activities like grocery shopping and financial management. Basic math and consumer education provided by AA+ empower students to engage more fully in their communities and build financial security, with many students gaining the confidence to shop independently for the first time.

What are the compelling reasons to support this organization? How is this organization doing transformative work? Afghan Advantage serves an extremely high needs population – Afghan women who have recently come to the US as refugees. Approximately 50% of these women have zero literacy skills; they have never been to school and do not know letters or numbers in their own language. In Afghanistan many of these women were not allowed outside the home without a male chaperone, so they lack experience with basic activities like shopping for food or using public transportation. 99% of the women do not know how to drive.

This lack of basic education and life skills leaves the women ill-equipped to learn English and adjust to life in a new country. The Seattle area has many resources available for refugees but accessing these resources requires a level of education and agency that the Afghan women do not have. For example, our local community colleges offer English as a Second Language classes for newcomers, but the classes are taught with written materials and are designed for students who know how to read and write in their native language.

Afghan Advantage bridges this gap and gets the women to the point where they can access resources and unlock opportunities to transform their lives. The AA+ curriculum focuses on key foundational pieces that have ripple effects. For example, the women learn how to say and write their names and addresses, which allows them to fill out forms, which allows them to access medical care and enroll their children in school. The women become empowered to solve their own problems and address their families' needs. It transforms how their husbands and children see them and how they see themselves. They go from being scared to leave their homes to being independent women who contribute to their families and communities.

Highlight a story of impact. Afghan Advantage shared with us many stories about women who started with no English and/or no education, and have gone on to study at community college, get jobs, learn to drive and become mentors and leaders for other Afghan women.

AA+ also shared the stories of Yasmin and Shahnaz, two Afghan mothers who have children with serious medical issues. It was scary for them not to be able to talk to the doctors or participate in their children's medical care. After gaining skills through the AA+ classes, Yasmin can now take the bus to the hospital to visit her child and can set up medical appointments. Shahnaz can read about her child's medical condition, ask questions of the doctors and advocate for her child.

What is the organization's area of greatest need? Paying women for their work and hiring more staff to meet the needs of the community. There is always a waitlist for their programs and additional staff would allow more women to be supported and educated.