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**Human Rights and Immigration Law Nonprofit to Resettle Afghan  
Refugee Artists in U.S.**

*New project from the Artistic Freedom Initiative aims to resettle and support 18 at-risk  
Afghan artists with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation*

**NEW YORK** — [Artistic Freedom Initiative \(AFI\)](#) announced today that it has secured \$500,000 in funding from the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#) to launch its Afghan Artists Protection Project (AAPP), a holistic resettlement initiative developed in response to the growing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan following the United States' withdrawal in August. The project aims to safely resettle 18 Afghan artists and their families, who are increasingly threatened under Taliban rule, and allow them to preserve their livelihoods as artists in the United States.

Since the U.S. announced its intention to withdraw troops from Afghanistan in August, AFI has received over 1,800 individual requests for legal assistance from Afghan artists, many of whom have been subjected to torture, beatings, door-to-door searches, destruction of art and musical instruments, and the infliction of physical injuries to prevent artists from artistic creation.

“The stakes couldn’t be higher in relocating the artists whose lives and livelihoods are under direct threat. No one chooses to leave their home unless they have no alternative,” said [Sanjay Sethi](#), **co-executive director of AFI**. “We are grateful to have the support of the Mellon Foundation to ensure we can safeguard human life, dignity and the right to artistic freedom through the Afghan Artists Protection Project.”

Through AAPP, Artistic Freedom Initiative will facilitate the legal relocation and resettlement of these artists and their families by providing pro bono immigration representation, relocation assistance, temporary housing, resettlement funds, employment and fellowship opportunities and ongoing support post-relocation. Mellon

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Foundation funds will support legal services through all phases of the U.S. visa process and provide financial assistance and other support for artists after they have left Afghanistan.

“AFI has provided critical legal support and a human lifeline to so many artists over the past four years,” said [Emil J. Kang](#), **program director for Arts and Culture at the Mellon Foundation**. “We are proud to support the Afghan Artist Protection Project and its thoughtful, artist-centered, values-driven, long-term approach to serving artists at risk.”

The organization began evaluating applications for immigration assistance in August. To date, AFI staff conducted reviews of almost 2,000 applications from Afghan artists in order to determine their eligibility for US based artist visas. While most applicants under consideration are still in Afghanistan, some have successfully fled to neighboring countries. Artistic Freedom Initiative expects to begin welcoming Afghan artists as early as Spring 2022.

“We realized early on in our work that effective resettlement requires much more than just a visa,” said [Ashley Tucker](#), **co-executive director of AFI**. “When creating the Afghan Artists Protection Project, we needed to ensure there were avenues for artists to support their families and build up their portfolios in the United States in order for them to meaningfully pursue their artistic careers in a safe environment.”

Through partnership with a prestigious U.S.-based institution, the program will prospectively host 10 Afghan artists in 1-year paid fellowship positions across a variety of artistic disciplines. AFI also aims to provide several artist engagements in the form of year-long placements in its [NYC Artist Safe Haven Residency Program](#), which provides housing, legal services, professional development and community engagement to artists at risk.

Through AFI’s Artists for Social Change program, exiled artists will have the ability to showcase their work locally and safely amplify the social justice causes they are dedicated to in their home countries. At-risk artists have the opportunity to present their work at artistic freedom-focused exhibitions, concerts and events, produced and curated by the organization. Past events have been held at prestigious institutions such as the

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Queens Museum, Lincoln Center, National Sawdust, and the Kennedy Center, connecting artists with creative and diaspora communities in New York City and beyond.

Since its founding in 2017, the Artistic Freedom Initiative has worked on more than 500 cases of at-risk, forcibly displaced artists, through which it has provided more than \$2.5 million in pro bono legal services and resettlement assistance. The artists in AFI's network come from over 50 countries and work across more than 30 creative disciplines, from poets to graphic designers. The nonprofit has steadily grown its holistic service model with the help of its longtime funder, the **SDK Foundation for Human Dignity**, a foundation committed to promoting human dignity and the well-being of mankind.

“Artistic Freedom Initiative could not forge exciting new partnerships such as this without the longstanding commitment of the SDK Foundation for Human Dignity to AFI's work and mission,” added **Sethi**. “We could not be more thankful for the support of our funders, who will allow us to expand our work protecting international artists from censorship and persecution.”

Led by immigration and human rights attorneys, the organization anchors its work to the shared commitment of protecting and celebrating cultural diversity, human dignity and freedom of artistic expression. Beyond AFI's work to provide holistic relocation and resettlement opportunities for artists under threat, it is also focused on the advancement of creative cultural exchange and the improvement of conditions for artists in their home countries.

If you are interested in speaking further with representatives of AFI about the Afghan Artists Protection Project, or its ongoing work to protect artistic freedom globally, please contact **Alexa Lamanna** at [alamanna@westendstrategy.com](mailto:alamanna@westendstrategy.com) and **(202) 320-2766**.

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