United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 13, 2024

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Schumer and Leader McConnell,

We write to you today to express our strong support and commitment to the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program and the inclusion of 20,000 additional visas in the fiscal year (FY) 2024 State and Foreign Operations (SFOPS) appropriations bill. This critical program has already saved the lives of thousands of Afghans who served with bravery and honor alongside United States troops and diplomats in support of the mission in Afghanistan. We must now uphold our commitment to these individuals and ensure that those qualified applicants are able to find safety in the United States.

Since August 2021, and at the urging of Congress, the U.S. Department of State has taken significant steps within the requirements of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 to streamline and improve the application process while maintaining robust security vetting and standards. In that time, the U.S. has issued approximately 13,285 visas to principal applicants, a significant increase in application processing to match the pressing need to protect our Afghan partners.

According to the Department of State, as of March 1, 2024, there are approximately 7,000 visas remaining, with 1,000 visas issued every month. 12,000 applicants have received Chief of Mission (COM) approval and are awaiting visa interviews and another 8,000 have COM approval and are collecting the necessary documents to become interview ready. This means that approximately 20,000 principal applicants will soon require visas. This is in addition to roughly 60,000 additional principal applicants who are undergoing COM review. According to the State Department, roughly 50 percent of cases at COM review receive approval and visa refusal after COM approval is rare.

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover, the need to expeditiously process SIV applications and ensure that all eligible applicants have a visa has never been more urgent. There have been credible reports of hundreds of Afghans killed while waiting for the SIV application to be processed. Congress must ensure that the visas are available to bring every eligible SIV applicant – including the surviving spouse in cases where our Afghan ally has already been killed – to the United States.

We look to the sentiments of the late Senator John McCain when he said that "it would be unconscionable to abandon these brave individuals who are now in danger for their service to the United States' mission in Afghanistan." Our Afghan SIV partners put their lives on the line to assist our military and diplomatic personnel over the 20 year mission in Afghanistan. We must now do all that we can to protect and assist them.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

M. Michael Rounds
United States Senator

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

Thom Tillis
United States Senator

Jack Reed
United States Senator

Jerry Moran
United States Senator

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Robert Menendez
United States Senator

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

Added March 14, 2024

Bill Cassidy, M.D.
United States Senator

Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator