Simran and her family faced a long journey before calling Canada home in 2019. They fled Afghanistan when she was just nine years old and spent a decade living as refugees with few rights. In that time, Simran’s brother was killed, devastating her entire family.

“There were many obstacles in our way and many problems that we faced,” she says.

Making the move from India to Canada wasn’t easy, but they didn’t have to do it alone. Afghan Women’s Organization (AWO), a United Way-funded agency, was there from the moment they landed—helping them find housing, providing food and clothing, and helping Simran and her sister plan for their future.

"They helped us and they supported us in every way, especially in our education,” says Simran, who is studying business administration at George Brown College. “I’m happy because I have lots of rights here in Canada, like rights to education,” says Simran. “Under the Taliban there are no rights for girls to study.”

AWO is one of the many settlement agencies United Way supports across Toronto, Peel and York Region. It focuses on helping women, their families and those escaping war and persecution build new lives in Canada. And they are in a unique position to do so: AWO was founded by refugee women from Afghanistan and is run by newcomers with experiences similar to those of their clients.

"Because it's an Afghan women-led organization, there's a cultural awareness of the different client groups we work with,” says Mina, secretary of the AWO board. “There's also a woman-to-woman connection that gives people an additional sense of comfort and understanding.”

Over the pandemic, AWO has provided critical emergency support to residents. Mina says flexible funding from United Way allowed them to support their clients with their greatest needs by running a food bank and mental health programs.

“Mental health support is one of the growing demands right now, especially in the Afghan community, given the challenges that people are experiencing coming from a war-torn country,” says Mina. Their peer-to-peer program has been an important resource for Simran and her family.

"When I lost my brother, me and my mother—especially my mother—were not in a good mental state. AWO provided counselling, which helped us,” she says.

Today, Simran feels optimistic about her future, saying she’s “very grateful that we got help to leave all these problems behind and have a brighter future here.” She plans to help other newcomers arriving in her community by providing clothing or supporting the food bank.

Simran’s help, and that of organizations like AWO, is something that will continue to be greatly needed as the GTA welcomes thousands of refugees over the next few years. United Way has long partnered with a broad network of settlement organizations across Peel, York Region and Toronto like COSTI, Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services, Rexdale Women's Centre, and many more, who have the expertise and the lived experience to best serve these new community members. Together, they offer a first point of contact and a lifetime of support, connecting people to schools, work, jobs, and friendships, helping our region harness all the talent newcomers have to offer. Our strong network is there, each day, every step of the way, in crisis and for the long haul.