

## For the RECORD

A compilation of facts, large and small, about our community

Percentage of TriMet riders who have or could afford a car: 84

Airplane passengers who took the Red Line to the airport over Thanksgiving weekend: 15,500

Acres in Oregon planted with Christmas trees: 63,000

Percentage of Oregon-grown Christmas trees exported to Mexico: 16

Years it takes to grow a 6-foot-tall Noble fir: 9

Number of acts of arsons committed in Portland in the first half of 2013: 89

Cost to operate 200 LED Christmas lights for 40 days, 12 hours per day: \$0.82

Percentage of smokers that attempted to quit in Multnomah County in 2013: 49

Drop in percentage points for smoking among eighth graders in Multnomah County in 2013: 74

Acres in the Interstate Corridor Urban Renewal Area, the city's largest: 3,990

Number of Oregon businesses paying additional fee for excessive fats, oil and grease in their wastewater: 72

Species of fish in the Columbia Slough: 26

Sources: TriMet, Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association, Portland Police Bureau, Portland General Electric, Portland Development Commission, Bureau of Environmental Services, Oregon Health Authority, Oregon Department of Agriculture

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30, 2014.

The State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs, which oversees media calls about the SIV programs, didn't respond to Street Roots' requests for an interview.

Many find the fact that the SIV programs have become almost an afterthought for lawmakers troubling.

"I think it's pretty shameful," says Joe Coon, an Iraq War veteran. "I think the further we've distanced ourselves from a lot of the mess that we've created in that region (Iraq), the easier it is for politicians to pull the plug."

### Helping a Friend Escape

According to Coon, it was sometime in 2007 — several months after he was discharged — that he received a panicked call from an interpreter he'd worked with and befriended while in Iraq. In order to protect his identity, Coon asked that Street Roots refer to the interpreter only by his first name, Bandar. On the call, Bandar told Coon insurgents wanted him dead.

Coon says his Oregon National Guard unit — which had been stationed north of Baghdad — acted as a kind of 911 emergency response team. In order to be ready at a moment's notice, Coon says, they'd sleep in their gear — soldiers and interpreters alike. When called to action, their missions included patrolling the roads, establishing checkpoints, and stopping and searching vehicles. Coon says without interpreters like Bandar, things would've been a lot harder.

"When you went on patrol," he says, "you'd generally have an interpreter with you, which was crucial in tense situations where emotions ran high and communication was very difficult. ... Interpreters like Bandar were absolutely essential in deescalating what could have been tense on the one hand and tragic on the other situations."

When Coon received Bandar's panicked call, he knew he had to help. Coon started looking into what it would take to get his friend to the United States. The Iraqi SIV program had just been created by a 2007 bill. (The Afghan SIV program would be created two years later.) Coon says he had no idea getting Bandar an SIV would take so long, or be so confusing.

"We stumbled around like idiots for many months — maybe a year — of this process not knowing what we were doing," he says. "It seemed like a burdensome process, to be charitable."

Coon eventually stumbled on an Oregon-based group called the Checkpoint One Foundation, which is the brainchild of Jason Faler, another member of the Oregon National Guard.

Like Coon, Faler had wanted to help interpreters he'd worked with. So he created the Checkpoint One Foundation to aid concerned soldiers like him, according to a news report by PBS. Coon says Faler got him in contact with lawyers that could help. (Faler couldn't be reached for this story.)

Faler's and Coon's stories are typical. The biggest push for Iraqi and Afghan SIVs for



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

In 2003, an Al-Qaeda bomb crippled interpreter Omar Al Kubaisi in Iraq. Two years later, another bomb killed two of his daughters. He and the rest of his family now live in the United States.

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— JOE COON  
IRAQ WAR VETERAN

interpreters and others has come from the US soldiers they've worked with, and the Internet is full of op-ed pieces written by enlisted soldiers and veterans — Coon included — that call for extending and reforming the SIV programs. Beyond justice, as Coon and Bandar's story shows, the reason for the advocacy is simple:

friendship.

Bandar is now stateside. He works in a restaurant and is studying to be a nurse. "Now he's the happiest, most hardworking, patriotic young man you will ever see," says Coon.

### Undetermined Need, Long Waits and Private Contractors

According to Coon, it took roughly two years to get Bandar's SIV. Advocates and interpreters that spoke with Street Roots say that's about average.

One reason for the long wait, they say, is the SIV programs have been poorly run and lack sufficient oversight. And that starts with the glaring fact that the government simply doesn't know how many Iraqi and Afghan nationals it has worked with.

"No one has a good number on how many people are conceivably eligible for this program and what's the pool of conceivable need here," says Katie Reisner, National Policy Director for the advocacy group Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project. "If the State Department or Department of Defense

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