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## **SEARAC Applauds Senate Passage of SSI Extension**

Washington, DC – Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) applauds the passage of a bill in the U.S. Senate on August 1, 2008 to extend Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits to elderly and disabled refugees and other humanitarian immigrants. Co-sponsored by Senators Gordon Smith (R-OR) and Herb Kohl (D-WI), this bill will extend SSI eligibility from seven to nine years for elderly and disabled refugees. The bill also includes retroactive provisions. Those who have lost their SSI in past years due to the seven year cut off because of their inability to become citizens within that time limit but would currently still qualify under the provisions of this new legislation, will receive an additional two years of SSI benefits. An additional third year will apply for those with pending citizenship applications.

For many elderly and disabled refugees and other humanitarian immigrants, including Hmong and Montagnards who fought honorably alongside American soldiers in times of war, SSI provides the very basic means of survival. The SSI program pays monthly benefits to elderly and disabled adults and children who are low income and have limited resources to maintain self sufficiency.

The passage of this legislation is very important for Southeast Asian Americans and other groups who arrived in the United States as refugees or humanitarian immigrants. Many arrived in this country having had little to no access to formal education and are unable to obtain employment due to language barriers, disabilities, advanced age or a combination of all the above. Because of the trauma that many refugees and humanitarian immigrants have faced, barriers to employment can also include wide ranging disabilities such as life threatening or serious illness and mental health issues.

“The U.S. has historically been a leader in providing safe haven for many fleeing war and persecution in their homelands. The passage of this bill reinforces that commitment and ensures that those who are elderly and disabled have the opportunity to maintain a level of self sufficiency,” states Doua Thor, Executive Director of SEARAC. “While SEARAC is very encouraged by the passage of this bill to extend SSI for these vulnerable populations, we recognize the need to continue to work with Congress and our advocate allies to ensure a more permanent fix to SSI for refugees and immigrants.

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