

Good morning. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Khammany Mathavongsy. I represent the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, also known as SEARAC. We are a national advocacy organization working to advance the interest of the Southeast Asian American community through leadership development, capacity building, public policy advocacy, and community empowerment.

### **The Needs for Disaggregated Data for Asian Pacific Americans**

We are in strongly support of AB 2420 to have accurate data on Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) communities.

APAs are currently the third largest ethnic group in California, representing 14% of the State population, and in the last decade, the population grew by as much as 52%. While APAs are often misperceived as a homogeneous group, they actually represent diverse cultures, languages, and ethnic groups. The misperception results in a wide range of socio-economic, educational, and health disparities. While overall data may show that APAs are doing better than average on national socioeconomic indicators, however, when data is separated out by ethnic group, it is clearly demonstrated that certain communities, especially among Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian ethnic groups, have some of the highest poverty rates in the state.

Contrary to the model minority myth, Southeast Asian Americans in California continue to struggle with economic, educational, and other challenges to a degree seldom understood by policy makers and state agencies. Southeast Asian Americans are *not* the “model minority.” Far from it, we are a marginalized and underserved community that requires increased attention from the State’s public policy makers.

According to the 2000 Census, Southeast Asian Americans have the lowest college graduation rates with just over 9 percent of Cambodian, over 7 percent of Hmong, over 7 percent of Lao, and over 20 percent of Vietnamese – compared with nearly 25 percent of Americans considered overall.<sup>1</sup>

The lack of state data also makes it difficult to characterize the health status of our communities in California. For example, it is estimated that Southeast Asian elderly in California are significantly more likely to be disabled, with 72.6 % Hmong, 53.6 % Vietnamese, 68% Cambodian, 63.4% Laotian. Between 1/5 and 1/3 of Cambodian, Hmong and Laotian elders live in poverty compare to only 8 percent of total CA population.<sup>2</sup> Regarding health disparity, approximately 85 percent of Cambodian suffers from depression and up to 60% with some symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Cambodian had four times the rate of stroke as White American. Hmong women have the highest rate of invasive cervical cancer than other ethnic groups combined and only 30 percent of Vietnamese women had ever had mammogram and only 53 percent of Pap tests.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC): *Southeast Asian American Statistical Profile Based on the Data from 2000 Census, 2004*. <http://www.searac.org/seastatprofilemay04.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC): *Aging Among Southeast Asian Americans in California: Assessing Strengths and Challenges, Strategizing for the Future, 2004*. <http://www.searac.org/aging-seaamer-fin.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum: *Health Briefs 2003*. [www.apiahf.org](http://www.apiahf.org)

### **Southeast Asian American Communities**

Most “Southeast Asian Americans” from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are refugees who began arriving in the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War in 1975. They sought refuge here in the United States to escape the threat of persecutions at the hands of the repressive government in their home countries. The year 2005 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our communities’ establishment in the U.S., and we now number approximately 2 million nationwide, with the largest populations in California, approximately 39 percent of all Southeast Asian Americans in the U.S. We are extremely diverse in terms of language and culture. Some of the main cultural and linguistic groups include Vietnamese, Cambodian (or Khmer), Hmong (or Mong), and Lao. Other groups include Iu Mien (or Mien), Khmu, Montagnard, Taidam, and ethnic Chinese. Vietnamese Americans alone number over 1.2 million. In California alone, there are over 85,000 Cambodian Americans; 71,000 Hmong Americans; 65,000 Lao Americans; and 485,000 Vietnamese Americans, with a total of a little over 706,000.<sup>4</sup>

### **Recommendation**

The U.S. Census provides data collection for a more comprehensive and inclusive list of APA ethnic groups. Having accurate data is critical in developing effective policies that respond to the needs of California’s residents. AB 2420 would ensure that California’s data collection and reporting is aligned with the U.S. Census so that it will more accurately reflect the diversity of Asian Pacific American population.

Thank you.

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<sup>4</sup> Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC): *Southeast Asian American Statistical Profile Based on the Data from 2000 Census, 2004.* <http://www.searac.org/seastatprofilemay04.pdf>