

Good afternoon distinguished Assembly Members. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Khammany Mathavongsy. I am the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center's, California Projects Director. Based in Washington, DC, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, also known as SEARAC, is a national nonprofit refugee organization managed primarily by and for Americans with heritage in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. SEARAC advances the interest of the Southeast Asian American community through leadership development, capacity building, public policy advocacy, and community empowerment. We have an office here in Sacramento in which we work specifically with the Southeast Asian elder population.

Introduction to Southeast Asian American Communities:

Most "Southeast Asian Americans" from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are refugees who have resettled in the U.S. or they are the children of refugees. Refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam began arriving in the United States in large numbers after the Vietnam War in 1975. Refugees from the Southeast Asia resettled in America because they had no other choice, many fled their home countries for "well-founded fear of persecution"¹ by the government. The year 2005 marked the 30th anniversary of our communities' establishment in the U.S., and we now number approximately two million nationwide, with the largest populations in California, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, the State of Washington, and Wisconsin. They are extremely diverse in terms of language and culture. Main cultural and language 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 Laotian Americans; and 485,000 Vietnamese Americans, with a total of a little over 706,000, approximately 39 percent of all Southeast Asian Americans in the U.S.

Contrary to the model minority myth, the majority of Southeast Asian Americans continue to struggle with economic, educational, and other challenges to a degree seldom understood by policy makers and government institutions. Many of the challenges facing the communities remain unaddressed: for example, the strong link between poverty and high disability rates in some groups has been largely ignored up to this point. Southeast Asian Americans are *not* the "model minority," and they require increased attention from policy makers. In addressing community needs, policymakers can partner with a network of over 180 grant-eligible community-based and faith-based organizations that are managed primarily by and for Southeast Asian Americans.

Southeast Asian American Elders

I am here today to speak on behalf of the most vulnerable population in the Southeast Asian American community, the elders. The Southeast Asian elders will be disproportionately impacted if the Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI) is extended from ten to fifteen years as proposed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Currently, CAPI provides cash assistance to low-

¹ According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "A refugee is defined as a person outside of his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." Source: <http://uscis.gov/graphics/services/refugees/Definition.htm>, January 20, 2005.

income elderly and disabled legal immigrants who are ineligible for federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits due to federal welfare changes in 1996 and/or immigration status. However, for many of the elders, CAPI is their **only source of income** and it is critical to their survival, such as food, housing, and medication. By adding five years and forcing many elders to a waiting period is unfair and unjust. For example, an elderly individual immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 65 potentially could not receive assistance until s/he is 80 years old.

More importantly, elders in California and other states who are from the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam often find themselves in difficult circumstances. Most of them arrived in the United States as refugees after the Vietnam War, and practically all of them were adults when they came to this country. Few understood English or had job skills marketable in the American economy. Most arrived with practically no capital and many have relied on a combination of support from younger family members, as well as government, for their basic needs. Many have had a relatively short period of formal employment in the U.S., and therefore have limited access to retirement benefits. Many suffer from long-term disabilities resulting from their traumatic experiences in Southeast Asia. And because of their age many have found it difficult to adjust to life in their country.

Federal Supplemental Security Income

I would like to speak to the federal SSI program briefly if I may. Changes in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, imposed severe restrictions on legal immigrants' access to public benefits, particularly the 7-year provision, in which a refugee will lose their SSI benefits if they do not become naturalized citizens in their first 7 years in the United States. While it is technically possible for refugees to become citizens within this period, there are practical reasons why this often does not occur. A primary barrier to citizenship within the 7-year period is lengthy delays in processing of citizenship and adjustment applications by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). Even for those who meet all the citizenship requirements, delays in processing have made it impossible for many refugees and asylees to naturalize in the two years or less before their SSI eligibility expires. Another barrier is the application process, which involves multiple steps including a lengthy application, an in-person interview with the USCIS, a test of English proficiency and civic knowledge, and fingerprinting.

Recommendation

Due to the 7-year limit cut off for federal SSI, many refugees are then eligible for CAPI. However, if the proposal by the Governor is enacted, it would have a tremendous negative effect on the most vulnerable population in the Southeast Asian community. I would like to reiterate again that CAPI is the only source of income for their survival, and many do not have access to retirement benefits because of their limited time of employment in the U.S.

We hope that the Subcommittee will consider our recommendation to not extend the CAPI eligibility from ten years to fifteen years.

Thank you.