

**SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICAN ELDERS IN CALIFORNIA:  
BARRIERS TO ACCESSING AGING SERVICES**

**Seton Senior Center “Save Our Seniors” Town Hall Meeting  
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Good morning distinguished guests. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak before you 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”<sup>1</sup> by the government. The year 2005 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> 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. Alameda County ranks 7<sup>th</sup> among the top 11 California counties with Southeast Asian American populations exceeding 10,000.

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## **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. According 2003 report co-published by The California Endowment and SEARAC, *Southeast Asian American Elders in California: Demographics and Service Priorities Revealed by 2000 Census and a Survey of Mutual Assistance Associations and Faith-based Organizations*, between 1/5 and 1/3 of Southeast Asian American elders live below the poverty level compare with 11% of Asians overall and 8.1% of Californians overall. Over 90% of live in “family households” rather than institutional settings, 3/4 speak English “not-well” or “not at all” and are 72% more like to be disabled than California general population. These findings raise questions about the availability of institutional care for Southeast Asian Americans elders whose families are not able to appropriately care for them and whether the families that care for disabled elders in their households have access the support system from public sources.

More importantly, elders in California 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 Social Security 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.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There are significant barriers to Southeast Asian American seniors utilizing government, health and other services. They include:

- Language barriers. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act requires government funded agencies to find a way to communicate with limited English speaking people. The tremendous diversity in Asian and Southeast Asian languages makes it difficult for elder population to access publicly funded aging services.
- Cultural barriers and lack of information. Programs need to address the attitudes and values of Southeast Asian American elders considering areas of cultural reluctance or sensitivity. Information should be provided through sources that are likely to be listened to, including ethnic media, churches, family and ethnic organizations. Food familiarity will have a significant impact on the comfort levels of Southeast Asian elders as will other programs that take into account the cultural realities of the community.
- Fear of government. For many refugees, aversion to government programs was an important survival tool in Southeast Asia. Lack of familiarity with American government coupled with this history has led to an aversion to programs ranging from Social Security to health care.
- Transportation. Finding ways to get to services that are offered is another barrier to Southeast Asian American elders accessing services. As a result, elders become homebound and socially-linguistically isolated. Self help programs could encourage driver training to those capable of it and with access to vehicles.

Thank you.