

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
AMONG AMERICANS FROM CAMBODIA, LAOS, AND VIETNAM:
EDUCATION, DISABILITY, AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

**For Presentation to the
President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders**

**At the Public Meeting of the
White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders
January 24, 2005**

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Abstract:

As a former refugee and now an American citizen, I am honored to have the opportunity to speak to the Commission today regarding the challenges as well as successes of the Southeast Asian community in America. I was born in Laos, escaped to Thailand, lived in Ban Vinai refugee camp, and came to the United States with my own family fleeing persecution because my father was a Hmong soldier fighting for the United States. For refugees and communities from the countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, economic and community development must be carried out through a holistic approach. For our communities, economic and community development are closely connected to opportunities for education, support for “mutual assistance associations” (community based organizations created by and led mostly by former refugees using their own experience to serve the community), and programs targeting multiple barriers such as language that Southeast Asian families in poverty face on a daily basis.

My name is Doua Thor and I currently serve as the Deputy Director of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center also known as SEARAC. Based in Washington, DC, 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 community through leadership development, capacity building, public policy advocacy, and community empowerment. Dr. Max Niedzwiecki, SEARAC's Executive Director, and I will provide this testimony jointly.

Most “Southeast Asian Americans” from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are refugees who have resettled in the U.S. since 1975, or they are the children of refugees. 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

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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 MAAs, again community-based and faith-based organizations that are managed primarily by and for Southeast Asian Americans.

Introduction to Southeast Asian American Communities:

Refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam began arriving in the United States in large numbers after the Vietnam War in 1975. They resettled in America because they had no other choice: by definition refugees are fleeing “a well-founded fear of persecution.”² 2005 marks the 30th anniversary of their communities’ establishment in the U.S., and they now number approximately two million nationwide, with populations of over 40,000 in California, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, the State of Washington, and Wisconsin.³ 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.

Although refugee flows from Southeast Asia have decreased significantly since the 1980s, approximately 15,000 Hmong refugees originally from Laos are expected to enter the U.S. during fiscal years 2004 and 2005, and hundreds or thousands of Montagnard and ethnic Vietnamese refugees from Vietnam are likely to enter this year as well. In addition, well over half a million non-refugee immigrants have entered the U.S. from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam since the 1950s.

Challenges: Education, Poverty, and Disability:

Because most Southeast Asian Americans are from refugee backgrounds, many of them face challenges that are less common among other Asian American groups, as well as among Caucasian Americans. Here we will touch on only three areas of concern: education, poverty, and disability.

Many refugees, and especially those from Cambodia and Laos, arrived in the U.S. from rural, farming backgrounds, without having had access to formal education. Even today, Southeast

² 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.

³ Unless otherwise noted, figures in this paper are from the 2000 Census and drawn from the following publication: Niedzwiecki, Max, and TC Duong. 2004. *Southeast Asian American Statistical Profile*. Washington, DC: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC). Accessible at <http://www.searac.org/seastatprofilemay04.pdf>. Note: The 2000 Census significantly undercounted Southeast Asian American populations.

Asian Americans are less likely than others to have reached high levels of education. For example, according to the 2000 Census, over 56 percent of Hmong women aged 25 and over had had “no formal schooling” whatsoever, as did over 31 percent of Cambodian women, over 27 percent of Laotian women, and over 9 percent of Vietnamese women – compared with only 1.3 percent for American women considered overall. Likewise, college graduation rates in the communities tend to be low. Just over 9 percent of Cambodian adults were found to have a bachelors degree or higher, as were just over 7 percent of Hmong, over 7 percent of Laotians, and over 20 percent of Vietnamese – compared with nearly 25 percent of Americans considered overall. These college graduation rates for Southeast Asian Americans show drastic improvement since the 1990 Census, and the communities have many “success stories,” but much progress must still be made. Although the U.S. offers educational opportunities that were absent in much of Southeast Asia, it is still difficult for parents without much formal education to mentor their children when it comes to school; and for a variety of reasons it is still more difficult for low-income people to succeed academically, whatever their race or immigration history might be.

Education and poverty are interconnected among Southeast Asian Americans, as they are among other groups. Many Southeast Asian American communities demonstrate strikingly high poverty rates. The 2000 Census found that in 1999 the per capita income for Americans considered overall was \$21,587. Cambodians were found to have per capita incomes of \$10,215, Hmong of \$6,613, Laotians of \$11,454, and Vietnamese of \$15,385. In fact, Hmong were found to have the lowest per capita income of any ethnic group described by the 2000 Census, the second lowest being Tohono O’Odham Native Americans with \$8,395. Poverty rates were also found to be high among Southeast Asian Americans: over 29 percent of Cambodians, 37 percent of Hmong, 19 percent of Laotians, and 16 percent of Vietnamese were found to be living in poverty in 1999, compared with just over 12 percent of Americans overall.

Many factors contribute to enduring poverty among Southeast Asian Americans. Education is certainly an important factor, as are the fact that many refugees arrive in the U.S. without marketable job skills, the fact that many arrive in this country without knowledge of English or native-language literacy, and the fact that under current law elderly and disabled refugees who have not obtained citizenship are limited to seven years of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in most states.⁴ Rev. Y Hin Nie, the Pastor the United Montagnard Christian Church in Greensboro, NC, often tells us about members of his church who arrived in the U.S. alone at an advanced age and have lost their SSI benefits. They find it very difficult to learn English, and have not been able to pass citizenship tests or find jobs in North Carolina’s challenging economy. They rely upon charity from the church in order to survive, and given the economic limitations of church members this creates an unfair burden for the entire community. This kind of hardship is playing out in many states.

⁴ Some states (e.g., California) have implemented programs to continue the basic support of elderly and disabled refugees. In 2004, the Bush Administration supported an extension of SSI benefits to nine years, although that proposal was not passed into law. For details on H.R. 4035 and S. 2623 see http://www.searac.org/refugees_ssi.html.

These factors, and others, require further attention from policymakers, although efforts have begun to address them. One factor contributing to poverty in the communities, which has received little attention up to this point, is disability.⁵ In all American communities, disabled people are more likely to live in poverty. According to the 2000 Census, Southeast Asian Americans are more likely to be disabled than are Americans considered overall, and disability and poverty are more closely related.

According to the 2000 Census, approximately 19 percent of Americans considered overall, and 17 percent of Asian Americans overall, report having at least one disability. Southeast Asian Americans are more likely to be disabled: Approximately 24 percent of Cambodians, 21 percent of Hmong, 22 percent of Laotians, and 22 percent of Vietnamese report at least one disability. Disparities are particularly striking when we examine “mental disabilities.” Approximately 0.8 percent of Americans overall and 0.5 percent of Asian Americans overall reported mental disabilities. Most strikingly, 2.5 percent of Cambodian women and 2.1 percent of Hmong women reported mental disability.

The Census also found that Southeast Asians from Cambodia and Laos with disabilities were more likely to live in poverty, than were Americans in general or Asian Americans in general. Approximately 18 percent of Americans with disabilities lived in poverty, as did 15 percent of Asian Americans. However, approximately 28 percent of Cambodians with disabilities lived in poverty, as did almost 39 percent of Hmong, 22 percent of Laotians, and 18 percent of Vietnamese.

Disability is closely linked with poverty among Southeast Asian Americans. In fact, the 2000 Census found that in 1999 44 percent of Cambodian households in poverty had disabled householders, as did 48 percent of Hmong households in poverty, 45 percent of such Laotian households, and 38 percent of Vietnamese households below the poverty level.⁶ In many communities the U.S. Census indicates that almost half of the householders of the lowest-income households are disabled.

Despite barriers such as widespread disability, Southeast Asian Americans have continued to be innovative in promoting the economic well-being of their families and the community as a whole. Much of this innovation is centered at community-based organizations.

The Promise of Southeast Asian American Community-Based and Faith-Based Organizations:

Southeast Asian Americans have created many hundreds of formal and informal organizations and associations for community self-help. Often the secular organizations are referred to as “mutual assistance associations” or MAAs, and the religious ones such as temples and churches as “faith-based organizations” or FBOs. The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)

⁵ See the tables attached to this testimony for disability statistics.

⁶ 36 percent of U.S. households overall below the poverty level were found to have disabled householders, as were 30.8 percent of such Asian American households overall.

works with a national network of over 180 MAAs and FBOs that are grant-eligible and have combined annual budgets well over \$75 million.⁷ The Director of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), Dr. Nguyen Van Hanh, has correctly referred to these community-rooted organizations as one of the “three pillars of the Refugee Program,” along with partners in state government, and voluntary resettlement agencies or “volags.” SEARAC is proud to support MAAs and FBOs through many projects, including the first federally-funded project to increase the service capacities of refugee FBOs and CBOs (community-based organizations such as MAAs): the Values, Empowerment, Resources and Betterment project, or VERB, which is funded through the Department of Health and Human Service’s Compassion Capital Fund.⁸

Of the 182 organizations in SEARAC’s network, 84 offer economic empowerment programs in areas such as job training, microenterprise development, and individual development accounts or IDAs. An additional 54 offer assistance to their clients in accessing social service benefits. Other common program areas include interpretation and translation, youth services, cultural preservation, community celebrations, advocacy, services to elders, citizenship training, and health education. These organizations offer services that are cultural and linguistically appropriate, and that annually help thousands of families become economically self-sufficient. In many communities, they serve as essential bridges between communities that are still adjusting to life in the U.S., and the communities and institutions that surround them. In order to do their work effectively, hundreds of hospitals, police departments, schools, and other public agencies rely on the support of MAAs and FBOs, too much of which is provided on a volunteer basis. In a recent survey, SEARAC discovered that 82 percent of the organizations that provide “youth” services do so on a volunteer basis, as do 79 percent of organizations that provide services to senior citizens, and 59 percent of organizations that provide interpretation and translation services.

In order to continue and improve their good work, Southeast Asian American MAAs and FBOs need to face a number of harsh realities. First, more of them need to take a close look at the relationships between disability and poverty in their communities, and approach economic development in ways that respond to the needs to the disabled and make use of resources and funding in the field of disability services. Second, and more fundamentally, the organizations with plans to continue working with funding need to access a more diverse array of funders. For too long, many MAAs have relied upon funding specifically earmarked for “refugees” from a small number of funders, which is not sustainable over the long-term. FBOs have typically relied exclusively on community contributions, although many are well positioned to carry out more effective social services with funds from other sources.

MAAs and FBOs need the support of policymakers, funders, and support organizations in order to successfully face these challenges.

⁷ A searchable database of SEARAC’s MAA/FBO database is accessible at <http://www.searac.org/maa/>. Descriptions of the sector and listings are also available in PDF and print format at that web link. See: Niedzwiecki, Max, Sophy Pich, KaYing Yang, Thanh Tran, and Barry King. 2004. *Directory of Southeast Asian American Community-Based Organizations 2004: Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs) and Religious Organizations Providing Social Services*. Washington, DC: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC).

⁸ For details on the VERB project visit <http://www.searac.org/verb.html>.

Recommendations:

Our recommendations to the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are the following:

1. Remember when making public statements about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders that some communities continue to struggle economically, educationally, and in other ways. They are *not* the "model minority," and to describe them in those terms decreases the chances that their actual needs and strengths will be taken seriously by decision-makers in government and other sectors.
2. Remind your colleagues that in order to effectively promote economic development among Southeast Asian Americans, policymakers must also promote educational achievement, services and programs that support disabled people and their families, and other initiatives that impact upon well-being. Economic empowerment can best be fostered through approaches that attack the root causes of poverty.
3. Support efforts to strengthen Southeast Asian American community-based and faith-based organizations through increased funding, training, and technical assistance. These organizations are essential partners to hundreds of public agencies across the nation, as well as direct providers of uniquely effective services that foster self-sufficiency.
4. Provide a written description of the Commission's and Initiative's goals and progress to community groups within six months, or whenever feasible.
5. Build upon progress made by earlier Commissioners and by the Initiative in previous years. For example, make use of reports previously produced by the Commission and Initiative when planning for the coming months.

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Table 1: Percentages of People Aged Five and Over Reporting Disabilities⁹			
Populations	Percentage Reporting One Disability	Percentage Reporting Two or More Types of Disability	Percentage Reporting Any Disability
Total USA	10.4	9.0	19.3
Asian Americans	8.2	8.3	16.5
Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders	10.3	8.3	18.6
Cambodians	10.2	13.4	23.6
Hmong	9.1	11.7	20.8
Laotians	10.2	11.5	21.8
Vietnamese	9.2	12.3	21.5

Table 2: Percentages of People with a Disability who Lived in Poverty in 1999¹⁰	
Populations	Percentages of People with a Disability who Lived in Poverty in 1999
Total USA	17.6
Asian Americans	15.3
Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders	20.7
Cambodians	28.3
Hmong	38.5
Laotians	21.6
Vietnamese	18.1

Table 3: Percentages of Women and Men Aged 21 to 65 Who Reported One Type of Disability, which was a “Mental Disability”¹¹		
Populations	Women	Men
Total USA	0.7	0.8
Asian Americans	0.5	0.5
Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders	0.9	0.8
Cambodians	2.5	1.5
Hmong	2.1	1.4
Laotians	1.6	0.9
Vietnamese	1.1	0.7

⁹ Data from PCT 69, Summary File 4, 2000 Census.

¹⁰ Data from PCT 148, Summary File 4, 2000 Census.

¹¹ Data from PCT 69, Summary File 4, 2000 Census.

Populations	Percentage of Households with Income Below the Poverty Level that Have Disabled Householders	Percentage of Disabled Householders who Have Households Below the Poverty Level
Total USA	36.0	14.4
Asian Americans	30.8	14.1
Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders	34.3	19.2
Cambodians	44.4	32.0
Hmong	47.9	40.8
Laotians	44.9	23.3
Vietnamese	38.4	18.8

¹² Data from PCT 159, Summary File 4, 2000 Census.