



## PROJECT VOTE

### SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICAN VOTER GUIDE

**I**n the coming election, your vote will be important in deciding the direction of your country, state, county and city. Policies and legislation at all levels of government have a direct impact on the quality of your life as a Southeast Asian American. It is therefore important to know the issues and policies that directly impact your community. We hope you can use this voter guide to see how supportive candidates are to your issues and what kind of impact ballot initiatives would have on your community.

#### **Enriching the Lives of Southeast Asian American Senior Citizens**

Southeast Asian American seniors continue to add to the strength of the Asian American community and the nation. They have significant needs in the areas of health care, housing, public benefits, employment, and public safety. Last year thousands of disabled and elderly refugees lost their Supplemental Security Income (SSI). This is due to a 1996 law that states that any refugee who came to the United States after August 22, 1996 would only be able to receive SSI for seven years if they did not become citizens. Therefore, our community should:

- Support the restoration of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) eligibility for post August 22, 1996 immigrants and the limitation of sponsor liability to a five-year deeming period.

#### **Empowering Asian Americans to Overcome Poverty**

A difficulty in serving the needs of the Southeast Asian American population is the assumption that there is little poverty throughout the community. The 2000 Census found that there were over 300,000 Southeast Asian Americans living below the poverty level. The 2000 poverty rate was 38% for Hmong Americans, 29% for Cambodian Americans, 19% for Laotian Americans, and 16% for Vietnamese Americans.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the percentage of those living below the poverty level for non-Hispanic whites is 7.8% and 24.7% for African Americans. One of the policies that can help ensure that Southeast Asian Americans living in poverty do not fall through the cracks is the Temporary Assistance to Need Families (TANF) Program. To ensure that this program effectively serves and supports Southeast Asian Americans, we must:

- Support the economic empowerment of Southeast Asian Americans with a welfare bill that truly brings women and families out of poverty.
  - English as a second language classes should be allowed for longer than the current three-month limit.
  - The TANF Act should be adjusted to address the fact that domestic and sexual violence is a barrier to economic stability as well as to safety.

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<sup>1</sup> President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, AAPIs: A People Looking Forward, Washington, D.C., January 2001, p. 10.

### **A Home for All: Community and Economic Development**

Low-income Southeast Asian Americans need affordable, safe and secure housing. Elected officials must:

- Assure fair and affordable housing opportunities for low-income Southeast Asian Americans.
- Provide access to housing assistance for immigrant Southeast Asian Americans.
- Strengthen the capacity of community development and community-based organizations to serve the housing needs of low-income Southeast Asian American communities.

### **Educating the Forgotten Student**

As with poverty statistics, the “model minority” stereotype leads to an assumption that Asian American students need little assistance. In fact, serious challenges exist for Southeast Asian American students – specifically, Cambodian and Hmong American students. There is a substantial need for programs and funding to assist the many Southeast Asian American students who must learn English as they learn their other subjects. Ask your elected official to:

- Assure that there is adequate funding for the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).
- Support full funding of minority outreach programs for access to higher education.
- Support more resources for English language learners.
- Support the Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AAPISI), which designates institutions of higher education that serve significant pockets of Asian American and Pacific Islander students.

### **Including Southeast Asian Americans in the Local Government Program**

Local governments have not done well in serving the Southeast Asian American community. By bringing more Southeast Asian Americans into government at all levels, the government will better understand the community and its needs. The community needs to:

- Appoint qualified Southeast Asian American men and women with records of community involvement to all levels of government.
- Get more involved with local politics and begin to hold politicians accountable for their promises to the community and push for more solutions to problems faced by the community.

## **Preserving the Franchise**

The Voting Rights Act was originally passed to protect the rights of African Americans seeking to vote. While the rights of Southeast Asian Americans and others were also protected, it was not until the Voting Rights Language Assistance Act was passed in 1992 that the law addressed the needs of voters requiring language assistance. We must:

- Ensure that voters are able to vote by opposing discriminatory practices at the polls and advocating for language assistance by the local election officials.

## **Immigration: The Door to America's Future**

The immigration system of the U.S. faces serious trouble, from lengthy bureaucratic delays to lack of information. Already, Cambodian legal permanent residents are being deported to Cambodia, often without due process and knowledge of the legal system. Furthermore, thousands of Public Interest Parolees eligible to apply for a green card are denied access because of an unfair cap on adjustment. We must:

- Clear bureaucratic obstacles to citizenship such as the cap on adjustment for Southeast Asian American Public Interest Parolees.
- Provide meaningful, individualized, and independent consideration in judicial removal proceedings with guaranteed access to counsel. Eliminate mandatory detention for individuals who do not pose a danger to the community or present a risk of flight.
- Keep civil immigration enforcement a matter for federal officials only.
- Support the Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act/Student Adjustment Act.

## **Language Access**

With a majority of Southeast Asian Americans born outside the U.S. and a significant number of Southeast Asian Americans being of limited English proficiency (LEP), the ability to communicate has a direct impact on substantive rights and opportunities. Services for LEP persons are important to their health, ability to find work, and their ability to access important benefit programs. To ensure the continued existence of these services, we must encourage elected officials to:

- Appropriate funds for language access programs.
- Oppose national origin discrimination affecting LEPs.
- Increase funding for English acquisition courses for immigrants regardless of their date of entry under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.
- Oppose discriminatory English-only ideals, including English-only provisions at the federal, state, and local levels and workplace English-only rules that are not necessary for legitimate business purposes.