



## Community Profile: California's Central Valley

### *Fresno Center for New Americans*

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Hmong, an Asian ethnic group from the mountainous regions of Southeast Asia, faced persecution, especially the Hmong in Laos and those who had aided the American forces during the Vietnam War. Many sought refuge in Thai refugee camps and in Western nations. In the U.S., three areas— California's Central Valley, Minnesota, and Wisconsin—became home to the vast majority of Hmong refugees. A second wave of Hmong refugee settlement occurred in 2004 and 2005, and out of the 15,000 arrivals to the U.S., an estimated 2,500 new refugees joined the Hmong community in Fresno, with others expected to arrive in the coming years.

"There are so many issues that surface when a new group of people settles in a given area. Where will they live? What about jobs? Where will their kids go to school? What about health care?" asked Silas Cha, associate director of the Fresno Center for New Americans (FCNA). FCNA, established in 1991, works to address those and a host of other questions about how to meet the needs of the estimated 30,000 Hmong refugees in the area.

The answers are complicated when dealing with a refugee population with a unique history and a unique set of cultural beliefs and practices, not to mention linguistic barriers. Coming from Thai refugee camps with few employment opportunities, limited health services and schools, and the lack of running water in living quarters, "culture shock is inevitable," said Cha. "And there is a lot of cultural conflict, particularly over the treatment of health issues." For example, "soul loss" has traditionally been perceived as the root cause of illness, and the Hmong have relied on shamans and sacrifices, rather than methods used by Western physical and mental health practitioners, to restore well-being.

Even for the Hmong families who arrived during the first wave of settlement, challenges remain when it comes to attaining quality housing and employment that offers a supporting wage. Hmong families are typically very large. In 2000, the median household size for Hmong families in the Central Valley was seven people, compared with fewer than three people in the population at large. Cha noted that because of the high cost of housing, FCNA sees Hmong families overcrowding in small apartments in unsafe neighborhoods. And although many of the Hmong have been able to engage in agricultural work and own small farms in the Central Valley, language barriers and other skill deficiencies contribute to their high unemployment rate and low incomes.

The situation is certainly complicated, but Cha notes that "there has been a lot of optimism over the past year and a half." To help smooth the transition for new refugees, FCNA and other services providers recently took the initiative to form the Hmong Resettlement Task Force along with elected officials, city, county, and state government representatives, and school board members. In addition, private foundations have provided funding for long-term programs to help families learn how to access and navigate the health-care system. Cha noted that as a result of community health education and the increase in Hmong health-care professionals, an increasing number of Hmong are becoming more receptive to Western medical treatment. He also noted that members of the Hmong community are beginning to gain leadership roles where they can help shape public policy.

Programs run through the FCNA and other social service agencies in the Central Valley are also helping to acculturate refugees, foster leadership, and change the policy environment. FCNA's offerings include English as a Second Language classes, health education and referrals, and employment services. In this last capacity, case workers are able to work with both job seekers and employers in filling out applications, explaining workplace issues like safety codes, and resolving misunderstandings that may arise because of cultural differences. FCNA also conducts research, advocacy, and relationship-building to help bring the Southeast Asian community into the civic mainstream.

But a lot more work needs to be done to help both established and newly arriving refugees in the Central Valley gain a firmer footing. "In many ways the Hmong are an invisible population—on a large scale, we don't exist and people aren't aware of our issues," said Cha. "But we need to continue to create programs that are responsive to our unique needs so that we can build healthy communities."

*The Federal Reserve Banks of Chicago and Minneapolis have issued several reports on the Hmong community. Please visit:*

[http://www.chicagofed.org/cedric/hmong\\_and\\_control\\_household\\_and\\_business\\_data.cfm](http://www.chicagofed.org/cedric/hmong_and_control_household_and_business_data.cfm)

<http://minneapolisfed.org/research/studies/hmong/>