

Southeast Asians in Dane County: Realities of Isolation

United Way of Dane County's Call for Research

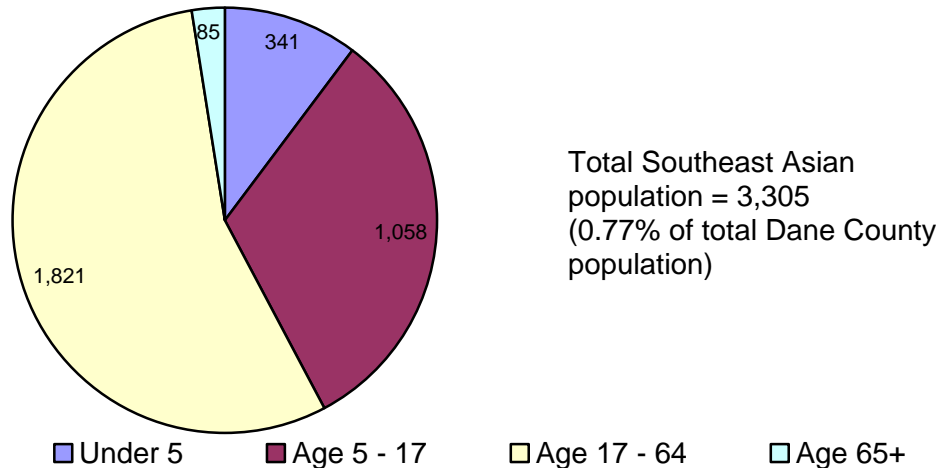
As United Way of Dane County seeks to understand the needs of our growing Southeast Asian population in Dane County, the Self Reliance and Independence Community Solution Team conducted three focus groups within this important community.

- Group 1: Individuals who have arrived in Dane County within the past year (conducted in the Hmong language)
- Group 2: Members of the "general" population (age 18 – 59) who immigrated to the United States more than 3 years ago
- Group 3: Individuals with enduring disabilities and frail seniors (over age 65), all born outside the United States (conducted in the Hmong language)

A total of 19 individuals participated in the Southeast Asian Focus Groups conducted by United Way of Dane County in Spring 2005. The results and conclusions in this report are representative of those participants and may, or may not, be representative of the greater Southeast Asian population in Dane County.

The Southeast Asian population in Dane County is mainly comprised of four ethnic groups: Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian and Vietnamese. Many of the Southeast Asians living in Dane County came to the United States as refugees following the Vietnam War. The members of these groups are often referred to jointly as "Hmong" although not all of them speak the Hmong language or have the same ethnic backgrounds. According to United Asian Services of Wisconsin, there are about 18 clans that comprise the true Hmong population.

Southeast Asians in Dane County, US Census 2000



We are issuing 4 Impact Reports focusing on African American, Latinos, and Native Americans and this report on Southeast Asians. These reports will be used internally by the UWDC Vision Council and Community Solution Teams and distributed to agencies to better help our community serve these minority populations.

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Starting in 2004, a new group of Southeast Asian refugees began resettling in our area, and as of May 2005, this has included at least 214 people in Dane County.

Conclusions

All three demographic groups were asked questions regarding:

- Key needs
- Barriers to using services in Dane County
- Conducting outreach and recruiting volunteers in the Southeast Asian community
- Providing culturally competent and relevant services

This report will cover overall conclusions followed by detailed responses from each demographic group.

Focus group participants spoke of many challenges and concerns. While their comments varied between demographic groups (which will be addressed in the following pages), a few common themes emerged, including:

- Many of the barriers can be directly traced to the fact that Hmong was not a written language prior to the Southeast Asians' arrival in the United States.
- Even for Southeast Asians who have lived in the United States for a number of years, there is a great deal of isolation from the community at large, with most of their contacts and interactions remaining within their own communities and a heavily reliance on one agency.

Key Needs in Southeast Asian Population

Southeast Asians in the United States Less Than 1 Year:

- Participants in this group **very dependent on United Asian Services of Wisconsin, Inc (UASW)**, a social service agency with Hmong-speaking staff. They noted that whenever they had questions about anything, they would bring them to the staff of UASW first.
- Most of the participants in this group were between the ages of 20 to 32 and all of them said they either had received **help to obtain their driver's license** or that they still need assistance. For them, having a driver's license meant having the ability to search for jobs and run errands for family members. Without a driver's license the participants felt stranded.

- The new immigrants also said that they were still creating their new homes in Dane County and were in **desperate need of basic household items**, including furniture, clothing and cooking utensils.
- Finally, the new immigrants said they rely on the URSW staff to **help with paperwork requirements for obtaining citizenship papers, resident status cards, and employment applications because of limited English skills.**
- Other needs and concerns included English classes, translation services, and job training.

Southeast Asians in the United States for More Than 3 Years:

- Many of these participants were also between the ages of 20 and 35. The top priority for them was to **increase their base salaries.** Many of the participants said that due to their limited English, the jobs they were only able to obtain low-wage employment. The participants said they had difficulty making ends meet and they relied on food pantries and other sources for household items and clothing for their children.
- This group had great **concerns about personal safety.** Many of the female participants stated that they did not feel safe in their own neighborhoods, feeling afraid to go out in the evenings, walking to their cars in shopping mall parking lots, and while riding the bus. The male participants also said that their neighborhoods were unsafe, especially in the evenings.

One participant gave the following example, "I was going to go down the street from my house to visit a new Hmong family, but the further I was from my house, the more afraid I was. I get nervous around the younger (teenage) kids and I think they can sense my fear. That makes the whole situation even worse, because these kids know I am afraid and they can intimidate me."

Almost all of the participants felt that the presence of more uniformed police officers would assist them in feeling safer.

- They also noted needing **housing, clothing, and resources to fulfill other basic needs.** Despite living in Dane County for more than 3 years, participants said they were still "piecing together" their households.
- Other needs and concerns included English classes, job training, translation services, and health and dental care.

Senior Southeast Asians:

- The senior participants stated that their number one need is **additional income**. They felt too old to work in factories or as cleaning staff and they had very little discretionary funds. The seniors complained of lack of food and other basics due to their limited incomes.
- They also felt a great need for **health and dental care**. The seniors said that their health needed attention and although they would be comfortable using Western medicine, they did not have enough financial resources to see a doctor. A few of the seniors mentioned needing their eyes checked because they could not see well in the evenings.

One senior said, "I use my herbs to help my back problems, but I need to see some one else about this. I can't sleep at night because of the pain."

- Concerns were expressed about the **lack of fresh produce** available at the UASW food pantry. According to the female participants in the group, this food pantry, which they used most often, only supplied limited amounts of canned vegetables. These women said they did not eat canned vegetables because they had no flavor.
- Other needs and concerns included transportation, lessons on how to ride use the public transportation system, and worrying about family they left in Thailand and Laos.

Barriers to Using Services in Dane County:

Participants from all three groups had very little experience with agencies other than UASW. The majority of participants said the staff of "their agency" (UASW) would go the extra mile to help them find the information needed. However, a few of the participants in the Senior Southeast Asian group said they attended the meals program at the Mental Health Center of Dane County, Inc.'s Kajsiah House.

Some of participants who had been in Dane County for more than 3 years said that they had accessed government services (such as the obtaining a drivers license from the Department of Transportation and a passport from federal government) but had little interaction with other services. Unlike other race/ethnic focus groups conducted by United Way of Dane County, the Southeast Asian participants were very isolated from the community at large.

As one respondent said, "If the staff can not speak to me in my own language, why would they expect me to seek help from them?"

Overwhelmingly, all three groups found **language differences to be one of the major barriers to accessing services** in Dane County. Many agencies (other than UASW) without Hmong-speaking staff felt off-limits to the Southeast Asian population.

Southeast Asians in the United States Less Than 1 Year and Southeast Asians in the United States for More Than 3 Years:

It is important to note that many of the participants of these two groups received assistance with transportation from UASW so they could take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, as well as access a few of the other services provided by that agency.

Other than the services provided by UASW, the participants in this group stated that they had **little knowledge of other agencies**. Furthermore, even when they were aware of other services, they were **unfamiliar with the streets of Madison** and/or they **lacked access to transportation**.

Although a few of the respondents were taking lessons on how to ride the Madison Metro bus and some were learning to drive a car, many of them still felt that they are geographically restricted because of their limited English skills. These residents of Madison did not know the names of major streets and thoroughfares, making travel to other agencies very complicated.

As one respondent stated, "I have a hard time getting from one place to another because I remember places by landmarks rather than street names. I remember that this agency is two right turns and one left turn and that it is on the corner so I can walk here. But when going longer distances, I can't remember all the landmarks."

Senior Southeast Asians:

The participants of this group reported that **housing and transportation** were their top barriers to using services. An overarching concern that was mentioned repeatedly was the insufficient funding received by UASW. Many of the seniors said that the agency was short-staffed and overworked and the services suffered as a result of this situation.

One respondent asserted, *“Why is it that the Latino and African American agencies get so much money and the Hmong-serving agency gets so little? There are more of us than ever before, but the funding for this agency has remained the same. Why is that allowed to happen?”*

Additional Stress in the Lives of Seniors

Senior participants reported additional stress in their daily lives due to their **personal financial situations**. Many of the seniors worried about having enough to eat, being able to stay in their homes if they fell behind in their rent, and keeping up with their monthly bills. An additional source of daily stress was their **failing health**. Many of the seniors said that they did not have the strength and endurance they used to have. Some said that they were concerned about their hearts and their spirits. Limited incomes complicated these concerns as seeking medical attention was often put on hold until the health problems reached crisis levels.

One elderly male participant said, *“I did not go to the doctor when I started to have chest pains because I could not afford to pay a doctor. But then, I felt numb on one side and had to have my granddaughter call the emergency people. In the hospital, the doctor told my granddaughter that I could have died if I didn’t get to the hospital on time... I just wanted to wait until I could save up the money to go to the doctor. But that did not work out the way I planned.”*

Senior participants also experienced a **great deal of daily stress thinking about the family members they “left back home.”** They worried that their family members might be lonely and suffering.

One participant said, *“I was able to bring my wife and my children to the US, but my brother and his wife did not get out in time. I worry every day about him and his family. Will they have enough to eat? Will they be punished because I left the country for the US? It is agonizing at times.”*

Conducting Agency Outreach and Volunteer Recruitment in the Southeast Asian Community

Participants from all three groups agreed that agencies wishing to do outreach and/or recruit volunteers within the Southeast Asian communities in Dane County should **come to “their” agency (URSW) and conduct information sessions**. Many participants expressed deep loyalty to URSW and felt that if the URSW staff endorsed the services of another agency, they would seek those agencies out in the future.

Another suggested outreach strategy was for agencies to **hire people bilingual in Hmong and English** and have them go door to door and visit with the Southeast Asian people with the purpose of sharing information about services.

One participant spoke very highly about an agency staff person, *“She is my eyes and my ears. She looks out for me and my family night and day. If any one wants to reach me they need to be sure they are known by her and her colleagues before I can consider going to their agency.”*

Another participant expressed frustration, *“I don’t want to sound arrogant, but if your agency and your staff do not speak my language, how do you expect me to seek your services? I have left messages at some of agencies listed in United Way publications and have never heard back from them. I assume that they do not understand Hmong and leaves me with all my problems unsolved.”*

Specifically with efforts to recruit Southeast Asian volunteers, participants suggested that agencies should **offer free ESL classes** as an incentive.

But, one female participant warned, *“The young people are struggling to learn English. But these young people are in school and working and have duties around the home. So be careful not to expect too much from the Hmong youth.”*

Providing Services to the Southeast Asians Population Requires Consideration of Cultural Norms and Bilingual Staff

In times of stress, participants in all three groups said that they turn to family, friends, and sometimes, God. They felt agencies should be aware of these cultural norms when developing services.

They expressed that their family had **duties to honor the wishes of their relatives**. When seniors fell ill, they called upon their children and/or grandchildren for help. These family helpers are ready and able to assist those relatives in need regardless of their own needs. This sense of duty often causes a financial strain on the family. But, according to cultural norms, no expense is to be spared when caring for an elderly family member.

Depending on friends also plays a large role in the lives of Southeast Asians in times of stress.

“Friends can provide that advice that you could pay hundreds for, but because they are your friends, it is all free,” said one participant who had been in the area for more than 3 years.

Finally, participants also mentioned **turning to God** when troubles ran deep.

One participant said, “God is there for us and I believe that. My god may not look like your God, but he is mighty and he is talented and he will find the way for me when I am too troubled to see the correct path.”

Participants stated that because **Hmong was not a written language prior to their arrival in the United States**, even the most educated Southeast Asians can struggle with written documents and paperwork.

Furthermore, participants felt that many of the youth in their community were at risk of losing their culture and language, *“if something is not done fast!”* This concern must be addressed at many levels, including in the services provided by agencies.

“Our children and grandchildren need to understand our history back in the Homeland, how we left the old country, why we left, and learn that the elders deserve respect for all the struggles they had to endure to bring them to this land of freedom,” stated an elderly male participant.

“No one seems to care about the past anymore. The teen gers think our history has no bearing today. But they are so very wrong. Our history is what brought us here today. Our history is what has strengthened us when we first arrived in this country. Children without a culture and a history are losing their souls,” said another participant.

Participants named a number of other services that they felt a need for in their community, including: **driving lessons offered in Hmong, ESL classes, computer training, childcare, and respite services for caregivers**.

In closing, all of the focus group participants were very clear about their needs, the barriers they have to accessing services, the additional stress in the lives of seniors, and in methods for conducting outreach and recruiting volunteers from Southeast Asian population. Perhaps more than anything else, addressing the isolation of this population with services tailored to their cultural norms is an important starting place to increase the cultural competence of the greater community in Dane County.

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