

# **Leadership in refugee communities**

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# 1. BRIEF HISTORY OF INDOCHINESE MAA'S IN THE U.S.

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In a country that has been built largely by immigrants and refugees from other shores, the importance of ethnic self-help organizations cannot be overstated. Traditionally, newcomers have banded together for economic reasons, mutual support and the vital culturally-appropriate sustenance necessary to recreate life in a foreign land. Examples of this ethnic clustering are woven throughout the American historical tapestry.

Like the predominantly European peoples who came before them, refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam have created their own patterns of self-help organizations, better known as Mutual Assistance Associations (MAA'S). Looking back, it is interesting to note that such groups existed in Indochina, although in slightly different forms. The *Wat* (or pagoda) in Cambodia and Laos and the *Dinn* (or village temple) in Vietnam functioned as a community center for spiritual, social, cultural, educational, even economic and political activity. Furthermore, refugee camp experience throughout Southeast Asia also bears witness to the tendency of refugees coming together to help themselves, resolve problems, and find mutual support.

Transplanted to the U.S., the MAA's appeared to take many forms, each with its own interest and function. In general, MAA's have been making important contributions to the life of those ethnic communities of which they are a part. Functions have ranged from the alleviation of loneliness among isolated refugees, solving specific problems (such as those of homebound women), meeting needs (like native-language tutoring for children), and cultural preservation,

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to welcoming and helping new refugees find jobs, housing, etc., and, among the few MAA's that have financial resources, providing a broad range of social and resettlement services. In the end, it is self-evident that an exiled people is best guided and assisted by others of similar experience and background who have already been through the process of adjustment and integration.

## 2. Lack of involvement

Until recently, both public and private sectors have failed to recognize and employ the strength and potential of Indochinese refugees as resources in the resettlement of their own peoples.\* The vast majority of both public and private sector resources have been invested in the reception and placement work of the resettlement agencies and the state administered cash assistance, medical assistance and social service programs. Indochinese community organizations have received little, if any, help in stabilizing their nascent communities in the U.S., and very little recognition for the voluntary effort they have put forth.

The major problem for Indochinese leaders and community organizations is that they have not had an appropriate role in planning and delivering services to their own peoples. The increased capacity and desire for involvement of Indochinese selfhelp groups come at a time when both popular support and public resources for refugee resettlement are greatly diminished. Large numbers of Indochinese are losing federal social service and cash assistance eligibility, creating a crisis within the ethnic community for many who have been here a while, but have not been able to become self-reliant. Moreover, although Indochinese admissions have declined, the need for resettlement efforts directed at this population is far from over.

## 3. Specific needs

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The general problem of lack of Indochinese involvement gives rise to a wide range of specific needs. The Indochina Refugee Action Center recently conducted an in-depth survey of ten communities that have been highly impacted by Indochinese resettlement, namely Santa Ana, San Diego, Fresno, Sacramento, Portland, Des Moines, Dallas, Providence, St. Paul, and Long Beach. The needs that were identified fall naturally into three categories:

1. *Access to and management of existing refugee program resources.* Few of the estimated 500 to 600 MAA's in the U.S. have contracts with states to provide social services to Indochinese refugees and most of these are limited to small orientation, translation and interpretation projects. Fewer still enjoy cooperative arrangements with local voluntary resettlement agencies. Indochinese lack of formal involvement in service provision is directly linked to their lack of involvement in policy-making. Many of those funded express the need for assistance with contract and grants management.

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Since 1979, IRAC has persistently advocated for a legitimate role of MAA's in refugee resettlement policy and programs. On August 16th, 1982, the Director of ORR released a formal statement in his memorandum to State Refugee Coordinators, urging States to "make every effort to engage in purchase-of-service contracts with refugee self-help groups in the provision of services to refugees and as advisers on program planning and policy matters". Several public and private agencies have also begun to initiate programs assisting MAA's to assume an ever greater role in serving and developing their own communities.

2. *Support to "at-risk" subpopulations.* Considerable family dysfunction is reported in the Indochinese population, frequently manifesting itself in intergenerational conflict and domestic violence. The disruption of traditional roles and relationships can be seen in the isolation of women and the elderly and the increased burden on youth to support their families. Specific agrarian, hilltribe populations, such as the Hmong from Laos and the Nung from Vietnam, are also at risk, as are those of all ethnic groups who are migrating from their place of initial resettlement due to welfare cutoff and lack of employment opportunities.

3. *Leadership development and long-term ethnic community growth.* Many Indochinese leaders are besieged by a high level of continuing crisis in their communities as services and welfare support are cut back. Frequently cited needs are in the area of management training, technical assistance around establishing

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for-profit activities to support non-profit services to refugees, and training in advocacy roles. Furthermore, Indochinese leaders and organizations need an opportunity to remove themselves from daily concerns in order to design long-term community and organizational development strategies, particularly in regard to economic self-sufficiency, processing of Indochinese citizenship applications, local civic and political action, and cultural preservation.

## 4. Evolution and New Directions

Not long ago, there was almost an "inflation" in the number of MAA's, all vying for members and scarce resources. Now, instead of the previous splintering and competition, there is evidence of a coming together, coalescing around issues and felt needs. Existing MAA's are beginning to define priorities and work cooperatively. Linkage and networking are being established not only within each ethnic group but also among different ethnic communities. The Refugee Consortium in Fairfax County, Virginia; the Council of Vietnamese Associations in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area; the Southeast Asian Refugee Federation in Oregon and Washington State; and the National Council of Southeast Asian Refugees in Washington, D.C., are just a few examples of this new spirit of cooperation at different levels, local as well as national.

As the Indochinese population in the U.S. has grown, self-help efforts have increased in number and variety. Over the past few years, many of these efforts have evolved into successful, well-run projects and organizations. Last year, the Indochina Refugee Action Center completed a *Survey of Refugee Self-Help Initiatives* which demonstrates the success of eighty of these projects, whose activities range from promoting community voluntarism and enhancing ethnic cultural preservation to stimulating refugee economic development opportunities, broadening local financial support, and providing social services.

In other words, while making every effort to expand their role and capacity in service delivery to meet critical needs of new

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arrivals and various at-risk groups, the MAA's have increasingly expressed the need for attention to a longer term development agenda for the growing number of Indochinese who are no longer concerned with basic survival and initial adjustment. This population is well on its way to becoming Indochinese-American and is concerned with community and economic development issues similar to those faced by other immigrant and minority groups in this country. The long-range goals of social integration, economic self-sufficiency, political influence and cultural integrity require new service, development and advocacy approaches, careful cultivation of existing and emerging leadership, and cooperation with the broadest possible base of American community resources.

## 5. ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF REFUGEE LEADERSHIP

In order to meet the needs and achieve the goals as specified above, refugee community leaders must define their roles and functions clearly and realistically. Generally speaking, attention should be focused on two major areas of activity, namely (1) Public Education and Advocacy, and (2) Community Consolidation and Development. These major roles address both external and internal functions of leadership in refugee communities.

### 5.1. 1. Public Education and Advocacy

This role requires the mobilization of a variety of informational and educational tools and techniques aimed at non-refugee groups and the American public in general. Efforts must be undertaken to encourage the media to pay more attention to the Indochinese, not only as refugees but also as a responsible and contributing minority group in the United States. Instead of passively responding to requests for information by newspaper, radio and TV reporters as in the past, refugee leaders should reach out to work with the media on issues of special interest to the American public, provide accurate information to promote acceptance and better understanding of refugees, highlighting the contributions Indochinese are making to American society. In the meantime, contacts by MAA leaders with public officials, employers, and business persons should be

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established, continued and expanded in order to dispel misunderstanding, prevent discrimination (especially on employment and housing), and help alleviate community tensions.

Special efforts should also be made to heighten the level of Indochinese involvement in policy-making, program planning, and service delivery in refugee resettlement. This can be done by establishing and maintaining contacts with the federal and state authorities, consulting with them on refugee problems and needs, providing information and input so as to facilitate the development of appropriate policies and programs for refugee MAA's. In addition,

negotiations should be conducted with voluntary agencies and other service providers regarding the possibility of MAA participation in resettlement activities, either as full partners or as subcontractors.

## 6. Funding issues

Because of diminishing government funding for services to all disadvantaged populations, the refugee community organizations now need to look for additional funding sources within the private sector. This includes national and community foundations, the corporate community, churches and other voluntary institutions. It is important to note that while public funding is generally limited to a number of job-related services, private sector resources provide support to a broader range of services and activities, including those necessary for ethnic cultural integrity or the advancement of the community. Support may be provided in the form of small grants, technical assistance or in-kind contributions such as office space, equipment, donated printing/duplications.

Tapping the private sector requires intensive research of available resources and some familiarity and experience with the specific requirements and expectations of each funding institution.

### 6.1. 2. Community Consolidation and Development

In order to become a viable and contributive element in the larger society, all refugee community members should make every effort to settle down in hospitable locations, with an environment

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that is reasonably suited to traditional ways of living. Frequent migration is disruptive and inhibits longer term adjustment and community development.

For the past several years, community leaders and members have organized to provide immediate resettlement services and sustain the kinds of activities that help foster further social and cultural adjustment for the newcomers. The next step is to work on improving the service delivery capacity of individual refugee organizations, especially in the areas of service that are eligible for public funding, such as community education, orientation and social services that result in early employment for new community members.

But the functions of MAA's cannot stop at service provision. MAA leaders and members must aim towards a far-reaching goal in transition from refugee status to a culturally and economically strong Asian American community. The creation of a sound economic base within Indochinese communities is vital to future survival and contributions to the U.S. It is essential, therefore, to develop income-generating projects and encourage cooperative efforts that provide necessary services to refugee communities. Beyond this, entrepreneurial community members must be encouraged to invest time and resources in creating new businesses and job opportunities for their respective peoples. Working together, local Indochinese groups can establish credit unions, group health insurance associations or even small business investment companies. Technical assistance and capital are available from public agencies and private institutions if communities can organize to take the first steps. The possibilities are limited only by the capacity to mobilize internal community resources and discover how to work within the American system.

With regard to the cultural aspect of community development, ethnic cultural heritage must be viewed as a contributing factor to the American pluralistic society. In fact, preservation of cultural heritage is one of the major objectives of Indochinese living in the United States. Many activities promoting Indochinese

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graphic arts, crafts, music, dance-drama, language and literature, religion and other aspects of life are being carried out in local communities. For the most part, these activities are kept alive by large amounts of volunteer time and effort, by financial contributions from the Indochinese communities and from concerned Americans. Examples of these activities include Cambodian marblecarving in California, Lao dance-drama in Tennessee and in Iowa, Hmong embroidering in Rhode Island and Minnesota, the Vietnam Archive Program at Yale University and Vietnamese studies in the District of Columbia and California. Other activities include teaching Indochinese languages to the young children and creating credit courses on Indochinese history and civilization in colleges and universities. These efforts should be continued and supported at national as well as local levels.

## 7. CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Experience over the past eight years has shown that there are at least four conditions that must be met by Indochinese refugee leadership in order to successfully achieve short-term and long-term goals of the community.

First, these must be an accurate *identification of community needs and interests*. This is most effectively done by refugee leaders who have an intimate understanding of their fellow refugees' needs and, at the same time, can mobilize community members to work together on matters of common interest.

Second, only with such in-depth understanding can *realistic programs* be designed in the most cost-effective manner to meet needs and solve problems. We can no longer afford the luxury of untargeted or too idealistic programs that do not address the current needs of the community and therefore cannot be supported by any funding source.

The third condition for success is the *mobilization of resources from within the refugee community itself*. For the past eight years, leaders and members of MAA's have made considerable contributions in terms of time, money and services to help both new

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arrivals and certain at-risk groups in the community. This sacrifice can still be found among those few MAA's which have been able to receive some funding to support their programs. In most cases, administrative costs has been kept extremely low so that services can be rendered at the maximum and in the most cost-effective manner. It is also important to note that, after eight years, resources within the refugee community have greatly increased and therefore can be tapped for further efforts of economic and community development. Special attention must be paid to the younger generation, many of whom have successfully completed their studies and established themselves in a wide range of professional occupations in the American society.

Finally, additional efforts are needed to *develop working relationships with the more established American agencies and institutions* that can help build the capacity of refugee community organizations to take care of their own people. Because of the interest and ability among the MAA's to supplement the work of resettlement agencies and other service providers through the provision of complementary supportive services, the refugee program has an unprecedented opportunity to draw upon these existing human resources. If concerned groups can work together to make sensible, cost-effective changes, the provision of essential services needed by new refugees may continue. The very fact of diminishing government resources could, in itself, become highly creative if it were to bring about new initiatives, a redefinition of priorities and the establishment of workable partnerships between refugee groups and American service agencies.

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