The Status of Southeast Asian Americans presented to the InterAgency Working Group White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

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Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to focus attention to the Southeast Asian American community. It is a special honor because this year is the 25th Anniversary of the Fall of Saigon and the anniversary of my families' escape from the mountains of Laos. Like others, I can say that my personal experience is a testimony to the challenges that this resilient community has endured over the span of more than two decades

People from the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam constitute the largest group of refugees ever to build new lives in the United States. Southeast Asian Americans - whose main ethnic groups are Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese - began to relocate to this country in 1975, when the American-supported South Vietnamese government succumbed to the military pressures of their Communist neighbors to the north. In that same year, the Communist Pathet Lao defeated the US-supported government of Laos, and in 1976 the US-supported Cambodian government was toppled by the infamous Khmer Rouge. Southeast Asian arrivals to this country increased dramatically in the late 1970s and 1980s, with the influx of Vietnamese "boat people" and Montagnards from Vietnam, the flight across the Mekong River of hundreds of thousands of Hmong, Lao, and other refugees from Laos,[1] and the escape of hundreds of thousands of Cambodians from the Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia. In all, 1,342,532 Southeast Asian refugees entered the United States between 1975 and 1998.

The process of Southeast Asian resettlement in the United States was largely facilitated by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement. It was also facilitated by my organization -SEARAC, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center - in its previous incarnation as IRAC, the Indochina Resource Action Center; by hundreds of other nonprofit agencies; and by innumerable open-hearted American individuals, families, and communities of all

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backgrounds.

Current estimates place the total number of Southeast Asian Americans at nearly 1.5 million, including 955,264 Vietnamese and Montagnards, 195,917 Hmong, 176,148 Cambodians, and 127,145 Laotians (not including Hmong, but including members of other hill tribe groups). California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and the State of Washington have the highest Cambodian populations; California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have the highest Hmong populations; Laotian populations are highest in California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota; and Vietnamese populations are highest in California and Texas. (See *Attachment 1*.)

Although the vast majority of Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese arrived in this country after having suffered through the Vietnam War and its aftermath, they arrived with distinctive cultural, historical, and social backgrounds. And while they continue to be bound together as a result of their shared experiences of war, sociocultural dislocation, and status as refugees in the United States, they also continue to be distinct in a variety of ways. No one language, other than English, unifies the groups: the main languages used include Vietnamese, Khmer (or Cambodian), Hmong, and Lao; and dozens of minority languages are spoken as well.

Southeast Asians now comprise 13.6% of the Asian Pacific American population, which is the fastest growing racial group in the United States. The majority of Southeast Asians are foreign-born, and are more likely to have low educational attainment levels, and to live in poverty than other Asian Americans. While Southeast Asians from these countries have meaningful commonalities, each group has differences that are important in developing appropriate interventions. Each wave of refugees brought different groups of people. Differing levels of homeland conditions, length of family separation, fear of being killed, escape routes, fertility rates, formal education, and transferable skills are all critical factors in predicating successful adaptation to American society. The first wave of refugees was comprised largely of former government and military officials, and members of the middle class. Individuals from this group soon emerged as the refugee leadership. They demanded a larger role in the resettlement of their fellow countrymen and began forming community based organizations as a vehicle to provide critical social services to the newcomers, as well as maintain a sense of cultural identity. Successive waves brought survivors of the killing fields and pirate attacks, political prisoners, Amerasians, and those who had spent years living in refugee camps in often horrific conditions. The diversity present in Southeast Asian refugees and their vastly different experiences in their home countries and on their journey to freedom largely explains the subsequent proliferation of refugee organizations and the creation of ethnic-specific organizations known as mutual assistance associations (MAAs).

In addition, the communities continue to be characterized by distinctive sets of difficulties with adaptation to life in the United States. For example, Cambodians tend to experience high rates of mental illness as a result of the traumatic experiences they endured during the Khmer Rouge period. As a result, many Khmer (and others)

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[1] "Montagnards," from the French for "mountaineers" are members of several distinct ethnic groups and have family histories in the central highlands of Vietnam. The term "Laotian" includes all people from Laos. The term "Lao" includes only members of the dominant lowland ethnic group of Laos. The term "hill tribe groups" refers to ethnic groups other than the Hmong who were from the mountainous regions of northern Loas.

find it particularly difficult to learn English and adapt to their new environments, particularly when they do not have access to

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culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services, as is often the case. Hmong tend to be particularly prone to living in linguistically isolated households, and to lack access to the institutional resources outside of their ethnic enclaves for that reason. Lao tend to have particularly weak institutional structures: unlike members of other groups, they tend to lack strong ethnic associations that can gain clout for them in the larger society and help them get access to the services they need. Ethnically specific, community-based organizations such as the MAAs have been prominent actors in the development of self-sufficiency in all Southeast Asian American.

Americans from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam continue to be distinguished from one another and the larger society by a variety of factors. However, increasingly during the past several years, Southeast Asian Americans have begun to think of themselves as "new Americans" rather than as "refugees." This ongoing transformation entails the following shifts:

- From an understanding that the United States is only a temporary home; to an understanding that this is a permanent home;
- From a feeling that Southeast Asian Americans and their descendants will never really be "American," but will always primarily identify as Khmer, Lao, Vietnamese, or what-have-you; to a feeling that one can maintain an identity which is simultaneously Southeast Asian *and* American; and
- From a belief that Southeast Asian Americans will have to rely upon others to make good decisions about how their personal and community lives should be structured; to a belief that they should be able to determine the courses of their own personal and community lives - in the ways that those freedoms are guaranteed by the Constitution and other central documents of our nation's political heritage.

As Southeast Asian Americans have become more enthusiastic in embracing "new American" identities, increasing numbers of them have entered mainstream political life as elected officials. For example, Mr. Tony Lam, a Vietnamese American, now serves as Mayor Pro Tempore of Westminster, California; and Ms. Choua Lee, a Hmong American, became the first - although not the last - Hmong ever voted into office when she was elected to the St. Paul, Minnesota, School District Board. Most recently, Mr. Chanrithy Uong, a Cambodian American, was elected to the Lowell, Massachusetts, City Council.

The number of Americans of Southeast Asian descent represented in government is growing, but it continues to be small. One reason for this is that Southeast Asian Americans tend to have an unclear understanding of the US system of governance, and to be fearful of government in general. The second reason is that, although growing, citizenship numbers remain low in Southeast Asian American communities.

Many Southeast Asian Americans misunderstand the US style of government, and fear government in general. To be sure, such fears find ample confirmation in the personal and communal histories of our constituents: in precolonial days, Southeast Asian nations were monarchies: during the colonial period, our constituents and their ancestors lacked political

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voice almost entirely; and more recently, our constituents have had to endure life under a succession of autocratic, brutal governments which are just beginning to tread paths to democratic reform. In addition, Southeast Asian Americans often perceive actions of the US government to indicate that they are not truly "American," that they would do well to avoid contact with government as much as possible, and that it would be fruitless for them to acquire citizenship. It is clear that anti-immigrant sentiments sometimes finds expression in legislation and governmental action: witness the "welfare reform" of 1996, INS policies towards the indefinite detainment of legal immigrants who carry minor criminal records, and the highly publicized cases involving campaign contributions made by Asian American residents of the United States. Such actions and policies do not escape the attention of our constituents, who often generalize their significance in light of their own experiences with the oppressive governments of their homelands. Such fears and misunderstandings serve to perpetuate a system in which Southeast Asian Americans tend not to run for office, or even to concern themselves with matters of government. Such fears and misunderstandings also serve to make Southeast Asian American communities more dangerous than they should be: many of our constituents turn their backs on the benefits that good relationships with law enforcement agencies could bring to their communities. Usually, the police are called in only when crimes involve serious injuries and killings. As a result, too many criminals remain on the streets to victimize Southeast Asian American communities again and again.

Our community is no stranger to crime. Because many of us are refugees, we are often resettled in lower-income neighborhoods and are victimized by crime just like other Americans. Like all Americans, we therefore generally support measures to control lawlessness. But we believe that certain features of the 1996 immigration laws - namely the inflexible and retroactive features of mandatory detention and criminal deportation - defy the very purposes for which they were enacted because of their far-reaching affects. Currently, there are approximately 4,000 people considered unremovable by the INS. As of May 1999, 1,629 are Cambodians, Vietnamese and Laotians. These individuals and their families' future are in limbo. These indefinite detainees cannot be released and they cannot be deported.

The second reason for a lack of involvement with mainstream political activity among Southeast Asian Americans is that many of our constituents have not yet gained US citizenship and therefore cannot vote. The reasons for this are legion: one is that the process of becoming a citizen can be mystifying and expensive for our constituents, especially those who do not speak English well.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that Southeast Asian Americans need to make every effort to become less "invisible" to mainstream American legislators and other decision makers, and to enter political service themselves. Despite the fact that increasing numbers of Southeast Asian Americans are flourishing, large numbers have yet to find a place in the American Dream.

We know better than to accept the over-generalizing "model minority" image of Asian

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Americans, and understand that Americans of Southeast Asian descent tend to experience difficulties in language, education, and employment at rates that exceed those of many other mainstream American and Asian American groups. We at SEARAC work with other organizations to ensure that issues that concern Southeast Asians are not buried underneath the gloss of the "model minority image." For example, we often draw attention to the fact that 43% of Cambodians and 65% of Hmong in this country live in poverty; Vietnamese American women are five times more likely than European American women to suffer from cervical cancer; and over 60% of Hmong Americans live in "linguistically isolated" households.

The following statistics, drawn from 1990 Census[2] data, highlight the lack of economic and professional success among Southeast Asian Americans (see *Attachment 2)*:

- Poverty rates: While 10% of all Americans and 14% of all Asian Americans were officially impoverished in 1990, 47% of Cambodians, 66% of Hmong, 67% of Laotians, and 34% of Vietnamese were impoverished.
- Participation in the labor force: While 65% of all American and 67% of all Asian American adults participated in the labor force, only 47% of Cambodians, 29% of Hmong, and 58% of Laotian adults did so. Only Vietnamese Americans, with participation rates of 65%, approximated the national average.
- Mean wage and salary income: This figure was $22,579 for all Asian Americans aged 18 to 64, but only $14,364 for Cambodians, $9,923 for Hmong, $13,634 for Laotians, and $17,590 for Vietnamese.

Based upon our extensive experience with Southeast Asian American communities, we and our colleagues believe that these statistics remain basically valid for Southeast Asian Americans today. Some of our community members have succeeded, and we hope that their numbers are shown to have increased by the 2000 Census; but many of them continue to live in poverty, even in this era of unparalleled economic prosperity.

According to the 1990 Census, even when Southeast Asian Americans find gainful employment and maintain their jobs, most of them do not hold high positions. While 26% of all American and 31% of all Asian American workers are employed in managerial and professional fields, only 10% of Cambodian Americans, 13% of Hmong Americans, 5% of Laotian Americans, and 18% of Vietnamese Americans are employed in such positions. The majority of Southeast Asian American workers are employed as "operatives" and laborers -fields which tend to offer low salaries and little chance for advancement. Many Southeast Asian Americans find themselves trapped in minimum wage jobs which do not cover even their most basic living expenses, and yet occupy so much of their time and energy that they are unable to either learn English and new job skills, or attend to their children as they feel they

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should. Because they make so little, they often have no option but to live in crowded, substandard apartments and in public housing facilities which are located in dangerous neighborhoods. Such jobs also tend to lack health insurance coverage, which makes them unsuitable for people with children or the sorts of chronic health problems which tend to characterize former refugees.

The reasons for the continued prevalence of widespread poverty among Southeast Asian Americans are many and various. One reason is that Americans of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese descent seldom access the services of mainstream banking institutions, and are thereby limited in their business development options. Although Southeast Asian Americans have been instrumental to the revitalization of several urban neighborhoods - such as in Orange County, California - through their development of small businesses, most of them have done so through the mobilization of capital owned by their family members. Under certain circumstances, this is a good option for them. However, it limits the amount of capital they can invest in their businesses, and therefore also the potential growth of their businesses. This strategy also places strong burdens on extended families: often, the fortunes of dozens of people can be gravely affected by the failure of individual small businesses. Southeast Asian Americans should have access to all of the banking options available in this country, and they should be educated about what those options are.

1990 Census data point to two other factors that inhibit the economic success of our communities:

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As many commentators have noted, the 1990 Census undercounted minority populations in the United States - including Southeast Asian populations - considerably. In addition, its data are somewhat outdated. However, we refer to the Census in this proposal because it is the best source of statistical data on our populations of interest.

- Education: 94% of Cambodians, 97% of Hmong, 93% of Laotians, and 83% of Vietnamese in this country who were aged 25 and over had less than a bachelors' degree.
- English language: While 56% of Asian Americans aged 5 and older “did not speak English very well,” and 35% lived in “linguistically isolated” households, corresponding figures for Cambodians were 73% and 56%, for Hmong they were 78% and 61%, for Laotians they were 70% and 52%, and for Vietnamese they were 65% and 44%. These figures have clear, and disastrous, implications for the ability of Southeast Asian Americans to access the employment opportunities and mainstream institutional supports that they need.

Given these statistics, it is particularly troubling that in the fall of 1999, the College Board decided that Asians and Pacific Islanders of all ethnic backgrounds not be considered “minorities” for the purposes of university admission and financial assistance.

I hope you will join with me in fighting all false stereotypes - including the stereotype that Americans of Asian and Pacific Islander descent are uniformly doing well in all respects, regardless of their ethnic and personal histories. As I have said, this stereotype is simply false. Statistics clearly demonstrate that Americans of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese descent tend to be significantly poorer and less educated than Americans of other backgrounds.

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In addition, I hope you will join with me in working towards the inclusion of all Americans -including Southeast Asian Americans - in the mainstream American political process. I trust all of us in this room share a vision of the United States as a society of diverse - but ultimately *equal* - individuals, families, and communities, all of whom share irrevocable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I am convinced that the formation of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders was an important step towards the genuine and full inclusion of API communities in the mainstream American political process. For this reason, I would respectfully request that you foster its success whenever you have the opportunity to do so.

Thank you.

Appendix A. Recommendations KaYing Yang February 23, 2000

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- Work with national advocacy organizations - such as SEARAC, the Cambodian Network Council (CNC), Hmong National Development, Inc. (HND), and the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA) - to reach out to Southeast Asian American communities.
- Help mutual assistance associations (MAAs) and other community-based organizations that serve Southeast Asian Americans to access federal funds. Often, such organizations provide the best access to the communities of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans.
- Focus more federal employment recruitment efforts on Southeast Asian Americans.
- Target Southeast Asian American communities through the community relations divisions of federal agencies.