

Dane County Refugee Task Force Organizes

Friday, May 14, 2004, the Ad Hoc Dane County Refugee Task Force started to get organized to facilitate and coordinate community response to the new Hmong refugees who are expected to arrive in Madison beginning this summer—possibly as early as July. The Task Force includes representatives of several agencies which have been providing services to the local Hmong, Lao and Cambodian community: Catholic Charities of Madison Diocese, United Refugee Services of Wisconsin, and Mental Health Center of Dane County/KajSiab House. It also includes other local service providers who will be involved in helping these newcomers settle into new lives: Community Action Coalition, Freedom, Inc., Madison Metropolitan School District, city and county agency representatives, public health departments, and others.

The Task Force is just beginning and welcomes others to join with them—just come to the next meeting, Friday, May 28 at 11 AM at Community Action Coalition, 1717 N. Stoughton Road (near MATC Truax campus). Call ThajYing Lee, Executive Director, United Refugee Services of WI, Arthur Upham, Program Developer at United Refugee Services, or Jo Oyama-Miller at Community Action Coalition, for more information.

The Task Force is a grassroots organization whose purpose is to coordinate community support for the new Hmong refugees from Thailand. As has been reported in recent newspaper articles, the Thai government is in the process of closing the last Hmong refugee settlement, Wat Tham Krabok. This unofficial encampment on the grounds of a Thai Buddhist temple known as a place of sanctuary, has been home to some 15,000 Hmong refugees who have sought refuge there following their escape from Laos, after that country fell to the communists not long after the withdrawal of CIA and American support in the 1970s. Because these Hmong supported the US in opposing the North Vietnamese communist take over of Laos, they soon found themselves fighting superior numbers of enemies, and gradually forced to flee into Thailand to save their lives and their families.

The most complete account of current conditions in the Wat Tham Krabok settlement have been published on the Ramsey County, MN, website (www.co.ramsey.mn.us)—but as you can imagine, these conditions are very poor. The Thai government did not consider the Wat an official refugee camp and so didn't provide even the limited support that was available in official refugee camps. And now the Thai government wants these non-Thai residents to relocate--most are not free to return to Laos safely so they must find new homes. The US government has agreed that those who can find sponsoring family members already in the US can apply to join them here, so it is very likely that the majority will come to the US since they cannot go home (though they stayed in Thailand hoping that in time the communist regime in Laos would fall and they could return to their beloved homes). But this hasn't happened and now they have little choice but to leave this hope behind.

Visitors to the "Hmong at Heart" exhibit at the Madison Children's Museum (due to start touring around the county at the end of May) will have heard some of these stories. Most of the Wat Hmong residents will relocate with family members already in the US. Today some 5000 Hmong live in Madison. Local agencies like United Refugee Services of WI estimate that 200-300 could start arriving this summer. They will arrive with very little, and though their families here will do

all they came to help them settle and adjust, United Refugee Service, KajSiab House, Freedom, Inc., and other agencies which have been providing services to these community members will need your help too.

Catholic Charities of Madison Diocese will receive federal assistance to help these newcomers for their first ninety days. United Refugee Services and Mental Health of Dane County/KajSiab House will then receive limited funding to continue efforts to help the Hmong refugees become established. But clearly there will be more to do than these limited funds can provide. If you want to help, please contact ThajYing Lee, Executive Director of United Refugee Services, at 256-6400 (thajyinglee@tds.net) or Arthur Upham (agupham@tds.net).

What do we need right now? First, first to thank you to those generous individuals who have already offered to help by their gifts of goods and money. If you would like to join them, please contact United Refugee Services at 312 North Third Street, 256-6400 or visit our web site, www.ursw.org. And thank you!

Second, several gracious offers have already come in but we have no place to store large items such as carpets, table, sofas or stoves! Anyone who can volunteer storage space, please contact us! We hate to turn away any gifts!

Third, we need volunteer response coordinators to take calls from donors and coordinate the pick up and delivery of donated items.

Thank you to all who have already been in touch with us at United Refugee Services, with offers to donate funds and goods to help. This generous response to those in need is one of the most wonderful and uplifting aspects of living in Madison!

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