

NEWS

Refugees To Lose Federal Help

Change affects local Hmong and others who came to the U.S. as legal immigrants

By Sheila Cohen

Doua Lee entered the room on a bleak December morning to tell her story. The 70-year-old Madison resident sat across the table and smiled politely, revealing an almost toothless mouth. When asked what she and her 71-year-old husband, Choua Vang, will do when their only source of income is terminated, she bowed her head and rubbed at the tears that began to run down her face. When she spoke, it was barely audible. "My only choice," said the translator, "is to kill myself."

Lee and Vang are among an estimated 5,000 elderly and disabled refugees and other legal immigrants nationally who will lose their Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits as of Jan. 1. The cutoff applies to immigrants who have lived in the United States for seven years without becoming U.S. citizens. Many will also lose their medical assistance benefits, which are tied to SSI.

SSI benefits and medical assistance have been a lifeline for legal immigrants who are unable to work. As a couple, Lee and Vang receive an \$829 SSI check per month. It is all they have to pay for food, clothing, shelter and utility bills.

Prior to the national Welfare Reform Act, passed in 1996, all legal immigrants were eligible for SSI benefits. But a provision of the welfare law suddenly terminated SSI eligibility to non-citizens, except for refugees and other humanitarian immigrants. They were allowed to receive SSI for their first five years of residence in the United States, later extended to seven years.

According to Sue Levy, head of the Immigration Integration Section of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, an estimated 120 Wisconsin refugees and humanitarian immigrants who fled such countries as Kosovo, Albania, the former Soviet Union, Somalia, Laos, and Cambodia between 1996 and 1997 stand to lose their SSI benefits in the coming year. These immigrants, like Lee and Vang, have been unable to complete the U.S. citizenship requirements due to age, disability and language barriers.

The United Refugee Services of Wisconsin in Madison last year helped 25 immigrants become citizens, says executive director Thaiying Lee. The agency's bilingual staff provides workshops, English classes, tutoring for the required civics exam, and help with the lengthy application forms. Still, it has four clients who will lose their benefits Jan 1 because they have not become citizens. For those people, there is a sense of hopelessness.

"They don't know what to do or where to go," says Lee. "All we can do now is ask our legislative representatives to help them."

In 1975, Doua Lee and her family were forced to flee their home in the hills of Laos. Her husband, Choua Vang, had served as a leader of Hmong soldiers, recruited by the CIA to fight alongside the U.S. military. When the United States withdrew from Southeast Asia, the Hmong people were left behind, targeted for slaughter by the victorious communists.

Lee and Vang spent the next 21 years in a refugee camp in Thailand. In the mid-1990s, the camps began to close, and the couple decided to emigrate to the United States. They arrived in Appleton, Wisconsin, in December 1996 with little more than the clothes on their backs. They came to Madison later.

Unable to work due to age, lack of language and infirmities, Lee spends several mornings a week at Kaj Siab House, a gathering place established by the Mental Health Center of Dane County to help Hmong refugees deal with lingering post-traumatic stress syndrome caused by the horrors they faced in the war. Many of them saw their families killed and their villages destroyed. Say Shwaw Vang, case manager at Kaj Siab House, "These people are now dealing with another kind of shock and don't know where to turn."

In addition to personal barriers to obtaining citizenship, the United States Citizenship Immigration Services (USCIS, formerly the INS) is heavily bogged down, causing long delays in processing applications. Since an individual must be in this country at least five years before making initial application for citizenship, there is a two-year window left to navigate the system within the seven-year limit for receiving benefits. Yet complications are common, and the process can drag on for years.

The loss of SSI benefits has begun to attract attention from social workers, media and elected officials. There are efforts afoot to include a short-term extension of SSI and medical assistance benefits in an appropriations package now before Congress. And the bipartisan U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform recommends that Congress de-link benefit eligibility for humanitarian immigrants and refugees from length of residence in the United States.

These changes are backed by Sen. Herb Kohl (D-Wisconsin): "The inclusion of an expiration date for such benefits was misguided when Congress first passed welfare reform seven years ago, and it should be repealed when Congress considers its reauthorization."

Adds Rep. Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin's 2th district, where many Hmong reside, "Ideally, USCIS should give waivers to this unique group, but the chances that the present administration would support that are very thin." And so Baldwin's office has been helping individual applicants expedite the citizenship process. One woman and her adult daughter who were about to have their benefits terminated in January took the oath of citizenship this month as a result of work done by Baldwin's staff.

Meanwhile, advocacy groups are scrambling to help those affected by the change. Says Shwaw Vang, "Some people are making plans to go to a homeless shelter." The problem, of course, is that many shelters are full to capacity.

Doua Lee, for her part, expects the consequences of the aid cutoff to be catastrophic. "We escaped death in Laos," she says. "We didn't know we would come to this country to die like this."

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