

Reaching out to Southeast Asians

Stockton to hire 6 bilingual community liaisons

By Cheryl Miller
Record Staff Writer

A quick scan of the phone book is all most Stocktonians usually need to find City Hall help with a utility bill, speeding cars on a residential street or a neighbor's dog that just won't stop barking.

But for a large and growing segment of this city, the book is little more than black and yellow gibberish that provides more confusion than answers. Many in Stockton's Hmong, Mien, Laotian and Cambodian communities, particularly older adults, don't speak English fluently and don't know much about city government, let alone how to seek help from a public agency.

And that can lead to problems when the city steps into a Stockton neighborhood dominated by Southeast Asian immigrants.

"Sometimes what we think they want is exactly the opposite of what they want," said Officer Doug Anderson, spokesman for the Stockton Police Department.

"We may be more worried

about all the cars parked on the street when they're concerned about cars speeding up and down a street that their children play on," Anderson said.

Stockton's leaders agreed last week to try to bridge those linguistic and cultural gaps by hiring six community liaisons to link city government and a growing Southeast Asian population. For the next year, the bilingual workers, whose salaries and benefits will be paid entirely by a federal grant, will act as translators and public educators in the city's Parks and Recreation, Police, Fire, library and code-enforcement departments.

"They'll be doing a lot of translating, but they've also been trained in outreach, on how to educate the community about how public agencies work," said Karen Srack, program coordinator at the non-profit Lao Khmu Association, which assists Southeast Asian immigrants and has provided a list of job candidates to the city.

Asians were nearly 20 percent of Stockton's population in the

2000 census. Many Hmong, Laotian and Cambodian refugees have come to the city and established enclaves.

"They've sort of isolated themselves, because anyone's going to tend to flock to what they know," Srack said.

That isolation may provide immigrants with a safety net, but it also fosters a huge cultural gap, Srack said.

"There have been several fires in Southeast Asian homes, because the way they cook creates a lot of smoke, and it's really annoying to them when the smoke detectors go off," Srack said. "So they just turn it off."

Children often act as translators, a role that can become troublesome when police are called to a disturbance and find a teen who is both a victim and the only communication link to his family.

A lack of English skills means little or no access to recreation programs or library services. Extensive duties in large, multi-generational families and reliance on home remedies often lead older adults to turn

away from public health programs.

"They don't really take care of themselves until sometimes we really can't help them anymore," said Dao Xiong, a Hmong outreach aide whom Lao Khmu placed with Su Salud, a community health organization.

Xiong draws on her language skills and knowledge of Hmong culture to gain the trust of Stockton's Southeast Asian residents while promoting her message of preventive health care.

"I try to let them know that it's really best to take care of things before it's too late," she said.

The liaisons will be chosen from a pool of candidates who have graduated from a Lao Khmu training program that teaches basic job skills and counsels job seekers through the interview process and the first few weeks of their employment.

The liaisons, who will not be allowed to replace existing city employees or fill vacancies, should be on the job by the end of the year.

■ To reach reporter Cheryl Miller, phone 546-8252 or e-mail cmiller@recordnet.com



Lao Khmu Association, Inc.

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**In Recognition of Your Outstanding
Participation in the
Refugee Employment Program**

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December 17th, 2004



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