

# *To Make A Difference*

American Mix: The Southeast Asians and  
Other Racial Minorities of La Crosse

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## THE STUDY

This report is one of ten prepared as part of the To Make a Difference (TMD) Needs Assessment funded by the La Crosse Foundation.

The purpose of the total assessment effort has been to stimulate our collective and individual consciences to wonder how we can make a difference in the health and well-being of the people of the La Crosse area community.

Begun in the fall of 1987, the study was guided by a volunteer steering committee comprised of 27 prominent citizens. Recognizing the difficulty of assessing all segments of the population, the Committee chose to focus on the following ten groups: abused individuals, alcohol and drug abusers, the elderly, SE Asians and other racial minorities, the poor, those with mental disorders, single parents, tenants and landlords, the unemployed, and youth. Ten assessors were selected from the faculties of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and Viterbo College. A compiled summary of all ten reports is available through the La Crosse Foundation.

The recommendations in the reports are those of the assessors and have not been debated, screened, or endorsed by the La Crosse Foundation.

It is the hope of the Foundation that all those who read or hear about the TMD Needs Assessment will embrace the results of the study and join with us in addressing some of the most pressing needs of our community today.

## THE FOUNDATION

The La Crosse Foundation is a community foundation, established in 1930 to attract, administer and distribute charitable dollars for the benefit of the La Crosse County area. Our interrelated missions are to create a permanent community endowment, to help donors realize their philanthropic goals, to help identify community needs, and to aid nonprofit organizations in their service to the community.

The La Crosse Foundation is one of over 300 community foundations across the country, and part of the fastest-growing segment of philanthropy in the nation. The La Crosse Foundation itself has doubled its assets and added seven new funds in three years.

We are proud to be able to fund the TMD Needs Assessment as part of our mission to identify the current needs in the community and then address them in a positive way. We acknowledge the many hours of work given by the assessors, the steering committee and its chair, reflected in part by the report that follows. For more information about the TMD Needs Assessment or the La Crosse Foundation, please contact the Foundation office at (608) 782-1148 or write to the Foundation at P.O. Box 489, La Crosse, WI 54602.

The La Crosse Foundation

## The Southeast Asians and Other Racial Minorities of La Crosse

### Introduction

Many long-time residents of La Crosse view their city as a classic representation of American life. Although they recognize its differences from our largest metropolitan centers, they see La Crosse as a rather typical American city with typical American residents. Many might be surprised at just how untypical La Crosse is - particularly as far as racial composition is concerned. Information from the last national census (1980) indicates that the La Crosse metropolitan area ranked fifth in the entire nation in the percentage of whites in its population (99%). Actually this part of the upper Midwest has a rather unique population structure in that four more of the top eight metropolitan areas with the highest white population are nearby (Wausau, Eau Claire, Dubuque, St. Cloud), with La Crosse nestled pretty much in the center of these cities. Thus, the La Crosse area has not been typical of the rest of the U.S. in terms of racial composition. This fact has affected the experiences and attitudes of its long-term residents and the experiences and attitudes of minority group members who have recently arrived in the area.

Many whites who are new to La Crosse are quick to note the relative absence of minority groups, some with a certain sense of relief that may reflect a desire to escape the racial tensions found in other cities. It may also reflect some of their own prejudices. Others, however, express a sense of concern that the homogeneity of the population deprives people of an opportunity to experience the cultural richness and inter-racial interaction that an ethnically diverse population can provide. It gives an unrealistic view of what is typical of American life in the rest of the country and creates a sense of isolation, making it more difficult to identify with the concept of the world as a global community.

### Definition of the Population

In 1980, the last year complete figures were available, the minority group population in the city of La Crosse, out of a total population of 48,347, included 172 American Indians (current estimates are 260 Indians, 95% of whom are Winnebago), 234 persons of Spanish origin, 139 non-Spanish blacks, and 142 listed as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Asian Indian, or Vietnamese. There were also 139 people categorized as "other."

Since the last census two situations developed which had a significant effect on the minority group population in La Crosse. About 200 Cuban refugees arrived in the La Crosse area beginning in May of 1980. At this time only about 30 remain. Also, a large number of Southeast Asian refugees began arriving. Whereas there was a total of 15-20 Southeast Asian refugees at the end of 1979, as of October 1987 there were 1,834, including 1,602 Hmong, 168 Cambodians, 29 Vietnamese, 19 Laotians, and 16 Chinese. It is estimated that the figures will reach 2,000 by September 1988. These developments significantly changed the minority situation in La Crosse and will likely drop the area from its fifth place ranking for percentage of whites in its population.

The Southeast Asian population is primarily composed of wartime refugees who had to flee their native countries to save their lives.

The Hmong refugees were small village farmers living in the mountainous highlands of northern Laos. Prior to the Indochinese war, they lived pretty much as they had several hundred years ago. They fought as allies of the U.S. against the communists, working closely with the CIA in its "secret" war in Laos. When the U.S. pulled out of the area in 1975, many Hmong had to flee across the Mekong River to refugee camps in Thailand. Thousands didn't make it; literally all Hmong refugees have lost friends and members of their family. (See Appendix 1)

The Hmong have a strong clan system. They often relocate within the U.S. to reunite clan members. The clan provides them with strong support groups.

The Cambodian refugees were also primarily village farmers who fled the Communist Khmer Rouge forces who set up death camps in some ways comparable to those of Hitler. From 1975-1979 mass executions were carried out, with from one to three million of the seven million population being killed. Over 4,000 women were killed at one prison camp alone because their husbands and families were educators or in the military. When Poi Pot was driven from office, many refugees fled to Thailand.

The Cambodians do not have a clan structure like that of the Hmong, so they are somewhat more fragmented and isolated and lack an equivalent support network.

#### Consequences for Majority-Minority Relations

There are various consequences of the relative absence of minorities in La Crosse. One result is that there isn't the intensely expressed conflict and the strong polarization between racial groups that are found in many areas of the country. There aren't areas of the city that are clearly recognized as ghettos where only one ethnic group is found. Some minority group members welcome this environment of less overt racism. Many Hmong in particular were attracted to La Crosse because it offered less of the racial conflict and tension found in big city life. However, many minority groups express a feeling that because La Crosse has had so few minority residents, those who are here are particularly visible and aware of standing out. They are viewed as outsiders who don't really belong here. Some Hmong, in fact, said that compared to St. Paul there was less crime in La Crosse, but more prejudice since the Hmong stood out more as being different. While there are relatively few blatant acts of racism, there are occasionally subtle messages that may imply prejudice. These include being stared at on the street, being watched more closely in a store, receiving service in a place of business just a little more slowly, or being told in person that an apartment is rented when a call a few minutes later by a white friend indicates it's still vacant.

Even in La Crosse some displays of prejudice are considerably less than subtle. A number of Hmong report people passing them on the street making comments such as "Why don't you go back where you came from?" Although most Hmong don't use alcohol, one Hmong man who visited downtown bars a few times with white friends now avoids the downtown area at night because he has been taunted by people who want to pick a fight to see if he knows "kung fu." He is a proud man, and, since he was a soldier, he knows he can defend himself, but he avoids confrontation because he does not want to create an incident that may reflect on the Hmong community. One of the most common incidents of harrassment reported by the Hmong are phone calls by people who have evidently chosen a Hmong name from the phone book and who ask them if they have a job and who tell them to go back to their own country. As a result of this, many have resorted to unlisted phone numbers making it harder for agencies to contact them.

One of the consequences of the small minority population is that minority members may be somewhat hesitant to trust the intentions of whites who are friendly toward them. They are aware that many people in large urban areas express their prejudices quite openly. They know what those people's true feelings are. Some may wonder if people in a smaller city like La Crosse feel a need to put on a friendly face and mask some negative feelings. They may feel that since many people have had very few experiences with other races and cultures, they may view minorities as a kind of a curiosity rather than as real friends and neighbors, or that whites may be accepting only if minorities play an almost subservient role. The burden is almost completely on the minorities to fit in, and there is little attempt to appreciate the minority experience, perspective, and culture. Differences aren't valued; doing things the way they are done here is. The Southeast Asian refugees are particularly conscientious about learning American culture and trying to fit in, but members of some other minority groups, particularly those who are American citizens, don't feel they should have to be like everyone else to be accepted. Thus

attempts to establish communication and friendship may take some time, effort and understanding, but if they are genuine, two-way, and mutually respectful, they can be rewarding for everyone involved.

Perhaps the major consequence of the increased influx of minority group members in La Crosse is that it puts people here in touch with the reality of life in the rest of the country. While there may be problems in helping newcomers of a different culture adapt to life in the U.S., these can also be viewed as worthwhile challenges. There are also the benefits of exposing La Crosse residents to part of the mosaic of peoples and cultures that make up our planet's population, thereby helping them to grow in tolerance, understanding, respect, and concern for others who are different from themselves.

#### Needs of the Population

All the minority groups in La Crosse have needs that deserve attention. The local American Indian population in particular in some ways has become a forgotten minority and justice demands that their concerns not be ignored. Yet, given their rapid large increase in population, their extreme cultural differences, and the crisis like nature of their situation, the majority of the needs discussed here are most intensely experienced by the Southeast Asian refugee population.

Community Education - Given the lack of minority group members in La Crosse in the past, coupled with the recent increase in numbers of Southeast Asian refugees, one of the most basic needs in the community is for continuing education about the experience, culture and perspective of all minorities. This is an area of concern mentioned by almost all minority group members and service providers who were interviewed. Without information about minorities, it is unlikely that others will develop understanding, concern and support for them. It is generally true that minorities know more about whites than whites do about them. The recent history of the Southeast Asian refugees is particularly important for people to know. Many people know little about the Winnebago who inhabited this area prior to whites and

many of whom still reside here. And with increased incidents of anti-black attitudes around the country, the legacy of the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's must be recalled and the story retold.

Personal Contact with White Americans - This is another need that was mentioned by nearly everyone interviewed and applies to all the minority groups in La Crosse. Interaction based on mutual respect and genuine concern promotes learning and understanding regarding both the majority and minority groups. Without contact between groups minorities can become "invisible," isolated and alienated. Such contact is particularly important for the Southeast Asian refugees since it helps them learn about American culture, learn the English language and keeps them from becoming isolated and "ghettoized." The learning and understanding that comes from meaningful interaction on a personal level can often accomplish much more than costly government programs that may otherwise become necessary.

Employment - Lack of employment is a serious problem for the American Indians (about 30% unemployed) and even more critical for the Southeast Asian refugees. Estimates are that only 5 to 10% of the refugees hold full time jobs and 50% hold part time or temporary jobs which don't provide insurance and other benefits. Lack of job skills and language problems are cited as major reasons for high unemployment as well as the fact that adequately-paying jobs are scarce in the La Crosse economy.

Many jobs which are available do not pay sufficient wages to support the large families of many of the refugees. The average wage paid to refugees who found jobs through the Wisconsin Employment Opportunity Program was \$4.06 for full time work. Consequently, many families must turn to the welfare system. While receiving aid they must take care not to work over 100 hours per month to avoid losing medical and food stamp benefits. In La Crosse County Southeast Asians make up 8% of the total cases receiving state benefits under income maintenance programs (Medical Assistance, AFDC, Food Stamps), which is much higher than the state average of 1.5%. However, it must be pointed out that the percentage of cases receiving such benefits



going to whites in La Crosse is 79.6%, also higher than the 65.3% going to whites in Wisconsin as a whole. Thus, the percentage of aid going to minorities is lower in La Crosse than the state average. (See Appendix 2)

Education - Job related training, language training and education about American culture are all essential needs for the Southeast Asian refugees and are closely associated with gaining successful employment. While many educational opportunities exist, the participation in them may be limited by such factors as transportation problems, lack of child care, and lack of incentive due to limited job opportunities.

The HMAA Board of Directors expressed the need for a professional volunteer who could assist them in managing the board, in running board meetings, and in long range strategy planning. They want assistance in learning to be better board members. The HMAA also needs volunteers to help teach citizenship classes.

Housing - Many American Indians and the majority of Southeast Asian refugees have difficulty affording quality housing. Due to large extended families and small incomes many refugees are crowded into small apartments. There are often misunderstandings and disagreements with landlords. Assistance in providing weatherization was mentioned as a need for both American Indians and Southeast Asians.

Health Care - Providing adequate health care for Southeast Asian refugees is difficult due to their lack of familiarity with modern medical care and their reliance on traditional customs which may have limited value from the point of view of modern medical science. They may be intimidated by large clinics and hospitals and misunderstand medical treatment and advice. It was mentioned that since coming to this country many women want smaller families and are interested in help in regulating family size.

Mental Health - Due to the dangers involved in leaving their homeland, the violent death of many relatives (one man lost six children crossing a river), the

loss of their homes and way of life, and their uncertain future, many Southeast Asian refugees suffer from anxiety, depression, or even post-traumatic stress disorder. Many Hmong and Cambodians mention recurrent terrifying dreams from their escape. Yet, there are literally no mental health professionals who know their language and few who understand their culture. Stresses may lead to domestic abuse, (particularly given the paternalistic culture and the common use of forceful physical discipline on children), excessive gambling, and occasional alcohol and drug abuse. (Alcohol abuse is more common among the Cambodians since the Hmong seldom use liquor.) At present most Southeast Asian refugees consult a shaman or talk to relatives when they have a problem and feel a need for counseling. Given the stresses they face, competent professional counseling is a very great need.

Legal aid - Most Southeast Asian refugees have little understanding of the American legal system. They may occasionally break the law without knowing it. They may come to distrust it, as when they report incidents of vandalism to the police and nothing appears to happen. They have problems knowing how to deal appropriately with situations like handling conflicts with landlords, getting security deposits returned, getting a driver's license without a birth certificate, or handling traffic tickets or accidents. They may have difficulty with welfare services, as when money is pooled by various families to buy a car. They may need assistance with family law or divorce law. There is a need for both legal help for specific services and general education about American law and the legal system. Increasing understanding of our laws and legal system will increase trust and respect for it.

Facilities - Minority groups in La Crosse, particularly American Indians and Southeast Asians, have needs for facilities for meetings, cultural activities, special celebrations and community outreach. Such activities provide social cohesion and a sense of security, build pride, reinforce cultural identity, provide

a vehicle for group cooperation and problem solving, and increase awareness and understanding through activities and speakers bureaus.

Transportation - Many Southeast Asian refugees have transportation problems which create difficulties in getting to school or to the doctor. Often a car is shared by more than one family. Buses can be expensive for a mother with her children and are very intimidating for new residents who don't know the language.

Day Care - Lack of childcare facilities makes it difficult for many women to take advantage of educational opportunities such as job training, language training, and training about American culture.

Clothing, Furniture, and Food - The Southeast Asian refugees community has a continuing need for clothing and furniture, particularly mittens, boots, coats, and snowsuits in the winter. Food such as rice, canned vegetables, and canned meats are needed on an emergency basis as funds run out at the end of the month.

#### Current Services in the La Crosse Community

While minorities in La Crosse have many needs, there are many organizations working to meet those needs. In fact, Gordon Beld in The Hmong in a Promised Land, a pamphlet which focuses on the Hmong in Fresno, Syracuse, and La Crosse, states, "The amazing thing about La Crosse is the amount of help available for the Hmong and other refugees there, not only through governmental agencies, but also through churches and individuals." That is a comment that the La Crosse community should be proud of.

A listing of organizations providing services to minority groups in La Crosse follows.

Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (HMAA) - Its mission is to serve as a charitable and educational channel assisting all Southeast Asian refugees in their adjustment to life in this country. It provides orientation and adjustment services, a free clothing and furniture center, health screening and referral through the Indochinese screening clinic, employment services, translation and

interpretation services, advocacy services, environmental home health education, youth counseling, career planning and economic development. It also sponsors the Midwest Ethnic Crafts store at Our Savior's Lutheran Church which sells Hmong crafts.

Resettlement Opportunity Services - This agency provided services to Cuban refugees and now to Southeast Asian refugees. It focuses on job training, development and placement and provides emergency transportation and some counseling.

Indochinese Screening Clinic - Provides health screening, teaching, and outreach, immunizations, medication for parasites on doctors orders and assistance in making appointments with doctors. It is funded cooperatively by the state through the HMAA, by the County Health Dept., and by St. Francis Medical Center.

Learning Center of La Crosse, Inc. - Provides small group and individual English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes, English conversation and tutoring, friendship classes focusing on sewing, cooking and healthcare, and tutoring for teens in school and for adults preparing for their GED certificate. Much use is made of community and university student volunteers. They were originally associated with Christ Episcopal Church, but are now separate.

Western Wisconsin Technical College (WUTC) - This institution provides ESL (English Language) training to 287 mostly Southeast Asian students and provides technical job training to 50-55 Southeast Asians. They also provide a job specialist for job development and placement for Southeast Asians.

Catholic Charities - Sponsors refugees locally and provides various services to Southeast Asians including the Parish Sponsorship Program through which parishes and individuals co-sponsor refugee families to serve as friends and provide continuing assistance in adapting to American life.

Lutheran Social Services - Sponsors refugees locally and provides various services to Southeast Asians.

The Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief (Episcopal Church) - Sponsors refugees locally and provides various services to Southeast Asians.

Refugee Advisory Board - Representatives of the HMAA, Resettlement Opportunity Services, Learning Center, Catholic Charities, WWTC, La Crosse County Human Services and the Job Service meet monthly to coordinate refugee services. Sponsored by HMAA.

Western Wisconsin Legal Services - Provides legal services and information to low income persons, including many refugees.

La Crosse Tribal Center - Branch of the Winnebago Tribal Center in Tomah which provides limited services for La Crosse Winnebagos, primarily administering medical assistance.

Three Rivers Inter-Tribal Council - Recently formed organization to promote and coordinate the needs of La Crosse area American Indians.

Minority Affairs Office of UW-L - Provides various services to minority students at UW-L.

Upward Bound - Program based at UW-L which helps prepare students for college whose parents haven't attended college. About 40% are minorities including 30% Southeast Asians.

Christian American Refugee Employment Company (CARREC) - A non-profit corporation employing the young people of La Crosse in service to the community by doing cleaning, lawn and home maintenance, embroidery and small moving jobs. It is associated with Christ Episcopal Church.

The above list may not be all inclusive. Other organizations may contribute significantly in providing services for minority group members in La Crosse. The variety and the cooperation of the various organizations in La Crosse is exceptional and a great strength of the services in this area.

### Overall Assessment of Services

Each area of need will be investigated to show how they are being addressed by the local service organizations.

Community Education - There is quite a bit of education about minority groups being done in the community. The HMAA provides speakers about the Southeast Asian refugees, the Minority Affairs Office sponsors various educational events open to the public, various organizations celebrated National Immigrants Day by sponsoring a program in which it was pointed out that La Crosse has immigrants from 74 different countries, and the local newspaper is generally viewed as doing a good job of relating information about local minority group members. There does, however, seem to be an absence of a source for information and speakers regarding the local American Indian population. There is also a need to update audiovisual materials relating to minorities in the public library so they are available inexpensively to schools and community groups.

In some ways it is possible that those who want information about minorities seek it out and those who don't can't be reached anyway. On the other hand people who have held prejudices and misconceptions about the Southeast Asian refugees have changed their attitudes dramatically when exposed to films and speakers explaining the experiences of the refugees. Therefore, it is important to keep the community exposed to such information. Since the film collection about minorities in the public library is dated and in increasingly poor condition, it should be upgraded and made current, particularly regarding Southeast Asian refugees. Given evidence of growing racism around the country, it is also important that the legacy of the struggle for civil rights by other groups not be forgotten.

Personal Contact with White Americans - This is consistently viewed as an important area to help minorities learn about American culture and language and to help white Americans learn about minority culture and experience. Yet, not enough extended personal contact occurs. Those programs making use of community

volunteers, such as the Learning Center and the Parish Sponsorship Program, should be encouraged and expanded. The education of a local priest in the Hmong language has done much to serve as a gesture of good will and can help increase communication and understanding.

Employment - The Resettlement Opportunities Center assisted in providing training and employment services for the Cuban refugees since they arrived in 1980. Most of those remaining in the area are employed and productive members of the community. None are on general relief.

Members of the Southeast Asian refugee community are eager to work and become self sufficient. (See Footnote 1) Employment is one of the most basic needs. HMAA, Resettlement Opportunities Center and WVIC all provide job related training and job development, yet, given the local economy, the problem is one of finding jobs with an adequate wage to make it profitable to give up AFDC, food stamps and medical assistance. HMAA received a Community Development Block Grant from the city through which it was effective at finding many jobs, although most paid a low salary or were part-time. A number of WVIC graduates from vocational and technical programs have obtained jobs as welders, machinists, auto body workers, auto mechanics, and restaurant workers. Not over 50% of the graduates have been employed. Many refugees accepted the fact that they will have to leave La Crosse to find employment, but this is particularly difficult to accept for people whose culture stresses strong family and clan ties.

A positive note for the future is the Key States Initiative program, which is funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement in Washington, D.C. The La Crosse HMAA will administer the program locally. Key States Initiative program will coordinate all agencies serving the refugees to work with selected families who have a realistic goal of total self-sufficiency. It will provide a highly intensive program of specialized short term skills training, on-the-job training,

pre-employment training and specialized ESL classes. 1987-88 is the first year of a three year program.

Education - WUTC provides vocational and technical training (50-55 refugee students currently) as well as English-as-a-Second-Language classes (287 students currently). UW-L has 25 American Indians, 46 Asians, 79 blacks and 31 Hispanics (1.9% of the total students, not foreign students). Viterbo College has 7 American Indians, 10 Asians, 8 blacks, and 8 Hispanics. These minority students constitute 3.1% of the student body. Many of the college and university students receive special tutoring and counseling. Since much of their life is centered on campus, they report few problems in the La Crosse community. There are currently about 650 Southeast Asian students in the La Crosse public school system which make up 9.3% of the total. The school system provides special programs and ESL classes. Other organizations sponsor tutoring and English programs.

Various organizations provide special educational programs to help refugees adapt to American life. These include independent living skills for young people, home management classes, and environmental health classes (childhood injury prevention, recognizing gas leaks, maintaining smoke alarms, etc.) These programs have been effective, but there are insufficient funds to meet the need.

The Johnson-O'Malley Program and Title IV bring in about \$20,000 per year to La Crosse in educational funds for Indian students. This money comes through the school district.

Housing - Many of the Southeast Asian refugees interviewed spoke of concerns with housing, the consensus being that it was not too good, but not too bad. Misunderstandings with landlords were often referred to. An increasing number of refugees are living in public housing. Care must be taken that housing codes are adhered to so that the refugee population is not taken advantage of and the development of slum-like ghettos is avoided.



Some American Indians interviewed mentioned housing as a need and said they missed out on some funding since tribal offices were located in Tomah. Weatherization assistance was mentioned as a need, but the Community Action Program has a project to help provide this.

Health Care - Health care was seen as being very positive by the Hmong and Cambodian refugees interviewed, particularly due to the services of the Indochinese Screening Clinic located near St. Francis Medical Center. In fact, the Cambodians rated the Screening Clinic as the second best thing they liked about La Crosse after the English classes in school. Through screening for communicable diseases the Screening Clinic has alleviated the fear by many Americans that the refugees constituted a health hazard. There does remain a need for emergency health care funds to meet the needs of those not covered by medical assistance or insurance, as is the case with children once they reach age 18. Such a fund has been established at HMAA and it needs continued support by the community.

There is a local outreach office of the Winnebago tribe which focuses primarily on administering medical assistance to tribal members.

Mental Health - Quality mental health services are one of the greatest needs for the refugee community, but little has been done to provide such services. A person from the state office of mental health has talked to the refugees. The HMAA has done a workshop for mental health providers and is planning an educational conference in the spring, but as yet there are no adequately trained counselors. The whole concept of counseling is foreign to the refugees, but the need must be addressed to deal with such problems as domestic violence. Effective techniques must be developed for handling these problems, given the cultural differences. (See Footnote 3) Some form of group counseling would probably be effective in that it decreases isolation and allows members of the group to assist in translation.

Legal Aid - Western Wisconsin Legal Services provides service to about five Southeast Asian clients per week for various legal problems mentioned previously. A

para-legal who speaks Hmong or Cambodian could be trained by them if funding were available for the salary. Such a person could translate and bridge the cultural gap, assist individuals who need legal help, do outreach work and education to the Southeast Asian community, help educate Judges and court personnel about Southeast Asian culture, and assist teachers and social service workers who need legal information pertaining to the refugee community. This need is generally supported by the refugees and the other service providers interviewed, though not all agree regarding its priority.

HMAA also provides some general information about dealing with governmental bureaucracies, refers people to Western Wisconsin Legal Services, and provides translators.

Facilities - Facilities for meetings and special events for the Southeast Asian and American Indian communities are generally found in schools and churches. The HMAA provides office space for service providers and a meeting room for about a dozen people, but the Southeast Asians see a need for a cultural center to provide an area for sale of crafts, youth activities, dances, and meetings of their entire community.

The American Indians lack an office or meeting place and see a need to provide similar activities as well as a location to contact to provide speakers to the La Crosse community. (See Footnote 3) Such a cultural center is particularly important to the Winnebagos who leave the tribal lands near Black River Falls. It would help provide a sense of pride and cultural identity for Indian youth and promote interaction between the generations. It could provide support and serve as a bridge between cultures. It could also serve to promote the success of the Three Rivers Inter-Tribal Council.

Transportation - While many refugees and some service providers mentioned transportation as a concern, others felt it was not a major problem. Resettlement Opportunity Service provides emergency transportation, but doesn't want to promote

dependence on it. Public transportation is intimidating for many adults and expensive for families with many children, but many Southeast Asian youths use the buses all the time and transportation will be less of a problem in the future. One service provider wondered if the transportation service for seniors could be expanded for other groups as was supposedly done in some other communities.

Day Care - Child care services were mentioned by many refugees and service providers as being a major need since the lack of such services often prevents women from taking advantage of educational opportunities. The Learning Center is one of the few programs that offers free child care and that is an important factor contributing to its effectiveness.

Despite the fact that child care was so frequently mentioned as a need, the La Crosse County Department of Human Services has a program which funds day care for educational and employment purposes for those persons who qualify financially. In 1987 about \$300,000 was spent for funding child care (not just for refugees). In 1986 8% of the total child care funds were used by refugees. The Womens Opportunity Center at WTC also has some money for day care.

One apparent reason child care is still seen as a need is that often funds are not readily available when needed. There is currently a waiting list of over 100 people for funds and they may have to wait three or four months or more, by that time the educational program may not be available. In addition the child care must be provided by a certified day care center. Such centers often charge a holding fee to cover those times when day care is not used, such as over school vacations, and these costs are not covered by county funds and must be paid by the families themselves. Some families with a large number of young children, as is often the case with refugee families, have difficulty finding a day care facility that will accept them. In addition transportation may be unavailable or prohibitively expensive for a mother with a large family. Even those receiving funding may not be able to count on it since funds may run out. During fall of 1987 all funds were

used up and unavailable until the state provided an additional \$40,000. During that time some people who could not find other sources were forced to drop out of school or other programs. Fewer refugees have applied for child care funds from the county than in previous years. This may be due to the above difficulties and to the fact that many women feel they have learned adequate English and cultural skills and have less of a need for child care. Nevertheless, many child care needs of refugees continue to go unmet and this prevents participation in various programs, particularly for newly arriving refugees who need it most.

An interesting note is that a number of Cambodian refugees mentioned that they would prefer child care provided by Americans since that would help their children learn English and indirectly help the parents learn English.

Clothing, Furniture, and Food - These necessities were repeatedly mentioned by the refugee community and by the service providers as continuous needs, although the service providers pointed out that emergency food is available through the Salvation Army. Sometimes food supplies run out at the end of the month in some families due to poor budgeting and sometimes due to late arriving food stamps. Clothing is a constant need, particularly warm clothing in the winter. There is a shortage of used furniture and it is currently being restricted to new arrivals. Mattresses were mentioned as a needed item.

#### Recommendations:

##### Support Needed From the La Crosse Community

1. Emergency financial support is needed for the Learning Center of La Crosse. It is a model program since it is well received and meets a variety of needs including teaching English, tutoring, training in American culture and skills, personal contact with community volunteers, and free child care. Its funding is scheduled to end in March 1988 and employees have taken salary reductions to

extend the program. A strong effort should be made to continue funding for this program. (See Appendix 3)

2. Continuing financial support is needed for the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association so that it can continue to develop, coordinate and provide a wide variety of services for the refugee community. Financial support will also continue to be needed by Resettlement Opportunity Services to allow it to continue its employment related services.
3. Child care should be expanded to allow both men and women to participate in existing educational programs when child care funds through the County Department of Human Services are not available. Since transportation problems also affect the ability to use child care services, new programs or expansion of existing transportation programs might be considered.
4. Better mental health services must be developed for the Southeast Asian refugees. This will take financial support to provide specialized training to service providers and a commitment by mental health professionals to educate themselves about the refugees and to work together to provide these services. Some type of group counseling program should be considered, particularly for youth. Financial support for members of the Southeast Asian community to obtain education in the human service field would also be useful so they could serve as professionals or para-professionals for their own people.
5. The community must commit itself to adequately inspecting rental properties and enforcing codes to provide adequate housing at fair prices and to avoid the development of ghetto-like areas.
6. Continued financial support is needed for the established emergency health care fund.
7. Contribution of clothing, furniture and emergency food supplies to existing programs are needed. This need should be widely promoted.

8. The potential for the Key States Initiative program to provide employment and self-sufficiency for selected refugee families should be supported and receive cooperation from business and community leaders and the public.
9. Consideration should be given to obtaining funding to provide a Southeast Asian as a para-legal to provide better legal services to the refugee community.
10. The value of cultural centers for the American Indian community and the Southeast Asian community should be recognized and supported by funding and cooperation with these efforts.
11. Funds are needed for increased independent living skills classes for youth and home management and acculturation classes for adults.
12. Volunteers continue to be needed by most organizations to enable them to use limited funds more effectively. The IMAA in particular needs volunteers to help teach citizenship classes and to assist their Board of Directors in becoming more effective. Secretarial and tutoring help are needed by many agencies.
13. Information about the refugee community and other minorities needs to be continually disseminated. Providing increased funding for appropriate audiovisual materials to the public library would help facilitate this. The local media should continue to provide information about local minorities and present them as integral members of the La Crosse community.
14. While high quality programs serving minorities exist in La Crosse and the cooperation between them is very good, the development of new projects taps new people with new ideas, creativity and energy, and therefore should be encouraged. Different projects working toward similar goals doesn't necessarily mean duplication and may help encourage a sense of grass-roots, community-wide involvement. Cooperation between programs should still be a continuing effort.

15. Community officials should show strong leadership in acknowledging the value of minority groups in La Crosse for providing culture diversity, in taking pride in the strong network of committed service providers working with minorities, and in unifying and mobilizing the community to meet continuing needs of minority group members and integrating them into the fabric of community life.

## APPENDIX I

THE FOLLOWING WAS WRITTEN BY A 15-YEAR-OLD HMONG GIRL LIVING IN LA CROSSE.

My dad died in 1979 during the war. We had been hiding in jungles ever since the soldiers burned down our village. We hardly had anything to eat except for the fruits that we were able to pick and the animals we were able to kill in the jungle.

Shortly after my dad's death, my brother and three of his friends got caught by the Vietnamese while hunting. My mom decided that we should turn ourselves in to the Vietnamese instead of keep on hiding since my brother was gone and we didn't have anything to eat. So we did and the soldiers took us to a crowded refugee camp. It was terrible there. People were dying of starvation and diseases every day.

We lived in that refugee camp for a couple of months. Then we were told by the Vietnamese soldiers to go into the jungle and plant our own food. At about the same time my captured brother was released. He was able to join the family again. Shortly after he arrived, insects started to eat our crops. Pretty soon we didn't have anything to eat. So we got permission to move to a town called Nan Nang close to Thailand. Most of the people there escaped to Thailand and left a lot of crops behind. When we arrived there wasn't much we had to do to get settled. All we did was pick an empty house and a rice field. Life was terrible! Since we were so close to Thailand, the guards were so strict. We can only go to our rice field at a certain time, be back at a certain time, and every week three women must spend the week with them.

Then on New Year's Eve, when most of the guards were off duty, we began our journey to Thailand. The trip was horrible! We couldn't use any flash lights because someone might see us. It was so hard walking through a thick jungle at night. Some people fell into holes and never got out. Babies were poisoned for crying so much. Sick and older people were left behind because they couldn't go on.

It took us exactly three nights to reach the Mekong River (boundary line of Thailand). Since we hid in caves by day and continued our trip by night, the trip



seemed long and tiring. We reached the Mekong River, the ride to the other side was short but expensive. Many parents were forced to sell their children to whomever wanted to buy them. They'd sell two or three for a few dollars. People would do just about anything to get across the river. But depending on the boat driver, sometimes he'll tip the boat over in the middle of the river when he was sure that he'd collected all their money.

We got to Thailand, and it wasn't any better than Laos, maybe worse! They put us into a crowded refugee camp again. Whoever dares to step out of the camp without permission would be killed. The only good thing about it was that we get to choose countries we want to live in. Since my brother was a soldier and had worked with Americans, he wanted to come to the United States. My mom didn't want to come because she didn't want to leave any of our relatives behind. She also thought that life would be the same no matter where we live. But we came anyway, and here we are! We were really amazed at how different life is.

The trip was unforgettable and sometimes I still have nightmares about our flight to freedom even though I don't really remember everything that happened. I do know one thing, being in this country was worth the struggle. Most American kids don't realize how lucky they really are to live here. But as for me and many others who had similar experiences, I am proud to be living here, in America!

**APPENDIX 2**

DATA ON ETHNICITY: 1/ NUMBER OF CASES AND OF PERSONS RECEIVING BENEFITS UNDER INCOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS DURING JUNE, 1987  
ACCORDING TO PROGRAM AND ETHNIC GROUP OF THE PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING 2/

## STATEWIDE

	CASES RECEIVING BENEFITS UNDER INCOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS		CASES RECEIVING AFDC BENEFITS 3/		CASES RECEIVING MEDICAL ASSISTANCE 1/		CASES RECEIVING FOOD STAMPS 2/	
	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS
ETHNIC GROUP OF PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING 2/								
ALL ETHNICITIES								
Total.....	174,668	428,112	95,711	289,859	146,846	364,779	117,027	318,970
RELATIVE PORTION..	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
AMERICAN INDIAN								
Total.....	4,242	12,001	3,063	9,396	3,511	10,433	3,019	9,168
RELATIVE PORTION..	2.43%	2.80%	3.20%	3.24%	2.39%	2.86%	2.58%	2.70%
ASIAN, PACIFIC ISLAND, OR OTHER ORIENTAL								
Total.....	2,668	13,627	2,300	11,699	2,405	12,355	2,382	12,839
RELATIVE PORTION..	1.53%	3.18%	2.40%	4.04%	1.69%	3.39%	2.04%	3.79%
BLACK								
Total.....	37,368	101,238	27,385	83,362	29,298	87,406	12,575	90,754
RELATIVE PORTION..	21.39%	23.65%	28.61%	28.76%	19.95%	23.99%	10.71%	28.47%

1/ LISTINGS PREPARED 7/22/87 BY D. DOKSCHNER, DRSS/DCS/DMI. IF YOU HAVE FURTHER QUESTIONS CONCERNING THESE DATA, CONTACT HER AT (608) 266-3124.

2/ THE APPLICATION FORM FOR I-M BENEFITS RECORDS THE ETHNIC GROUP OF ONLY THE PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING. THIS DISALLOWS PROPER RECORDING OF THE MIXED ETHNIC CHARACTER OF SOME APPLICANT FAMILIES.

3/ INCLUDING MANY WHO ALSO RECEIVE BENEFITS UNDER OTHER PROGRAMS.

DATA ON ETHNICITY: 1/ NUMBER OF CASES AND OF PERSONS RECEIVING BENEFITS UNDER INCOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS DURING JUNE, 1987  
ACCORDING TO PROGRAM AND ETHNIC GROUP OF THE PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING 2/ -Continued

STATISTICAL

ETHNIC GROUP OF PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING 2/	CASES RECEIVING BENEFITS UNDER INCOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS		CASES RECEIVING AFDC BENEFITS 3/		CASES RECEIVING MEDICAL ASSISTANCE 3/		CASES RECEIVING FOOD STAMPS 3/	
	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS
MEXICAN, PUERTO RICAN, OR OTHER HISPANIC ORIGIN Total.....	5,394	17,708	4,174	14,006	4,666	15,448	4,631	15,707
RELATIVE PORTION..	3.09%	4.14%	4.36%	4.83%	3.18%	4.23%	3.96%	4.63%
WHITE Total.....	114,094	262,522	54,819	159,428	97,346	220,653	69,379	196,594
RELATIVE PORTION..	65.32%	63.32%	57.28%	55.00%	66.29%	60.49%	59.28%	58.00%
MIXED, OTHER, UNKNOWN, OR MISCELLANEOUS ETHNIC GROUP Total.....	10,912	21,016	3,970	11,968	9,540	18,394	5,041	13,908
RELATIVE PORTION..	6.24%	4.91%	4.15%	4.13%	6.50%	5.04%	4.31%	4.10%

1/ LISTINGS PREPARED 7/22/87 BY B. DORSCHEIN, DUES/DCS/ONI. IF YOU HAVE FURTHER QUESTIONS CONCERNING THESE DATA, CONTACT HER AT (608) 266-3124.

2/ THE APPLICATION FORM FOR I-M BENEFITS RECORDS THE ETHNIC GROUP OF ONLY THE PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING. THIS DISALLOWS PROPER RECORDING OF THE MIXED ETHNIC CHARACTER OF SOME APPLICANT FAMILIES.

3/ INCLUDING MANY WHO ALSO RECEIVE BENEFITS UNDER OTHER PROGRAMS.

La Crosse County  
**RECEIVED**  
 OCT 22 1987  
 Human Services Dept.

DATA ON ETHNICITY: 1/ NUMBER OF CASES AND OF PERSONS RECEIVING BENEFITS UNDER INCOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS DURING JUNE, 1987  
ACCORDING TO PROGRAM AND ETHNIC GROUP OF THE PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING 2/-Continued

LA CROSSE COUNTY

ETHNIC GROUP OF PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING 2/	CASES RECEIVING BENEFITS UNDER INCOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS		CASES RECEIVING AFDC BENEFITS 3/		CASES RECEIVING MEDICAL ASSISTANCE 1/		CASES RECEIVING FOOD STAMPS 2/	
	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS
ALL ETHNICITIES Total..... RELATIVE PORTION..	3,398 100.00%	8,360 100.00%	1,793 100.00%	5,626 100.00%	2,957 100.00%	7,231 100.00%	2,194 100.00%	6,580 100.00%
AMERICAN INDIAN Total..... RELATIVE PORTION..	23 .68%	74 .89%	20 1.12%	66 1.17%	21 .71%	71 .98%	16 .73%	57 .87%
ASIAN, PACIFIC ISLAND, OR OTHER ORIENTAL Total..... RELATIVE PORTION..	272 8.00%	1,471 17.60%	209 13.80%	1,321 23.48%	260 8.79%	1,362 18.84%	250 11.39%	1,396 21.22%
BLACK Total..... RELATIVE PORTION..	14 .41%	47 .56%	14 .78%	46 .82%	14 .47%	46 .64%	9 .41%	32 .49%

1/ FIGURES PREPARED 5/22/87 BY B. DOHSCHNER, DIB&S/DCS/OHI. IF YOU HAVE FURTHER QUESTIONS CONCERNING THESE DATA, CONTACT HER AT (608) 266-3124.

2/ THE APPLICATION FORM FOR I-M BENEFITS RECORDS THE ETHNIC GROUP OF ONLY THE PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING. THIS DISALLOWS PROPER RECORDING OF THE MIXED ETHNIC CHARACTER OF SOME APPLICANT FAMILIES.

3/ INCLUDING MANY WHO ALSO RECEIVE BENEFITS UNDER OTHER PROGRAMS.

**APPENDIX 3**

DATA ON ETHNICITY: 1/ NUMBER OF CASES AND OF PERSONS RECEIVING BENEFITS UNDER INCOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS DURING JUNE, 1987  
ACCORDING TO PROGRAM AND ETHNIC GROUP OF THE PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING 2/-Continued

A CROSSI COUNTY

	CASES RECEIVING BENEFITS UNDER INCOME MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS		CASES RECEIVING AFDC BENEFITS 3/		CASES RECEIVING MEDICAL ASSISTANCE 3/		CASES RECEIVING FOOD STAMPS 3/	
	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS	NUMBER OF CASES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS
ETHNIC GROUP OF PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING 2/								
MEXICAN, PUERTO RICAN, OR OTHER HISPANIC ORIGIN (TOTAL).....	31	32	7	19	9	26	8	25
RELATIVE PORTION..	.32%	.38%	.39%	.34%	.30%	.36%	.36%	.38%
WHITE (TOTAL).....	2,704	6,166	1,431	3,948	2,301	5,191	1,819	4,009
RELATIVE PORTION..	79.58%	73.76%	79.81%	70.17%	77.82%	71.79%	82.91%	73.09%
MIXED, OTHER, UNKNOWN, OR MISCODED ETHNIC GROUP (TOTAL).....	374	570	72	226	352	535	92	261
RELATIVE PORTION..	11.01%	6.82%	4.02%	4.02%	11.90%	7.40%	4.19%	3.97%

1/ LISTINGS PREPARED 5/22/87 BY B. DOMSCHNER, DM&SS/DCS/OMI. IF YOU HAVE FURTHER QUESTIONS CONCERNING THESE DATA, CONTACT HER AT (608) 266-3124.

2/ THE APPLICATION FORM FOR I-M BENEFITS RECORDS THE ETHNIC GROUP OF ONLY THE PRIMARY PERSON APPLYING. THIS DISALLOWS PROPER RECORDING OF THE MIXED ETHNIC CHARACTER OF SOME APPLICANT FAMILIES.

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# LEARNING CENTER OF LA CROSSE, INC.

111 North 9th Street  
La Crosse, Wisconsin 54601

(608) 782-5600



## QUARTERLY REPORT December 2nd, 1987

Last years volunteer effort to provide valuable learning experiences to the Hmong and others in our community has developed into a fully functioning Learning Center.

### THE LEARNING CENTER

The Learning Center Inc. is a Non-profit institute offering instruction and services to adults who need the skills to integrate into the community. Our focus is the language and cultural aspects of American society. The classes are free and child care services are provided.

### GOALS

We strive to offer a quality program of real language real-life centered learning experiences. We work to have a one-on-one personal learning experiences in a supportive and non-threatening atmosphere.

### PROGRAMS

1. Small group and individual English-as-a-Second-Language classes, and reading classes.
2. English conversation and individual tutoring and workshops.
3. Hmong classes for a) Hmong Speakers and b) Non-hmong Speakers.
4. Friendship classes focused on a) sewing, b) cooking, and c) medical and healthcare programs.
5. Tutoring for teens in school, adults preparing for GED and other content area concerns.

### SOME NUMBERS AND DATES

Student evaluation and testing started September 14. Sixty-eight students have been tested and placed in classes. Volunteer orientation sessions were held the last week of September. We presently have over 40 volunteers who average 59 volunteer hours a week, (ESL program only). We have classes Monday through Thursday at four different times 9-11 a.m., 1-3 p.m., 4-6 p.m. and 6-8 p.m. Four skill levels were originally identified. An additional "New Readers" level has evolved as new materials were tried. Classes started for advanced levels the week of September 28th, lower levels started the week of October 5th. We have 28 class hours each week. The Friendship Classes focus on sewing, Mondays and Tuesdays, and cooking on Thursdays. Thirty-five students attend the Friendship Classes. Thirty-six children are cared for in the nursery weekly.



Learning Center of LaCrosse  
DECEMBER MONTHLY REPORT

Final numbers for the ESL program this session: A total of 284 contact hours this session. A total of 1212 student hours, 596 total volunteer hours. Two volunteers tied for top volunteer hour totals with 38 hours each, George Staats and Joe Papenfuss.

Noteworthy in December is that testing for the lower levels during the week of December 6 through 10 showed all but 4 students able to perform the eight tasks covered (asking and telling the time, Name, Address, self identification, Naming foods, and prices etc). The same testing session showed a large number from the three lower levels with significant reading difficulties. This same week the new readers level finished the book *Persona? Stories One*.

The sewing class was expanded to last from 9-2 P.M. for the students who needed access to the sewing machines. During the last cooking class we baked christmas cookies. Twelve children helped decorate the cookies.

A sessions on Hmong culture was presented to Headstart in co-operate with the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association Inc.

A volunteer party was given at Lisbeth's home. Certificates of appreciation was given to each volunteer. On the last day of classes a Christmas Party was held for students at Lisbeth's home.

Grant proposals were written and sent to Heileman and United Thank Offering. A project report was mailed to C H D. Semester report were mailed to all board members, granters and supporters along with community volunteers (from the January meeting).

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse professors were mailed, updates on the Learning Center, and information about new orientation which will be held Friday January 22 at 3 P.M., Monday January 25 at 7 P.M., and Friday January 25 at 10 A.M.

ESL Classes will begin Tuesday January 26, Cooking and Sewing classes on January 19th. Classes will run Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

Apr 20, 1988

John,

Here's a copy of the report I did for the LaCrosse Foundation.

This is the complete report. You saw a summary of it along with nine others which were published together in a booklet. Note the essay in Appendix I (following p. 21). It was written by a Central student and really says a lot. The Tribune used excerpts of it in an editorial. Thanks for your interest.

Darrell Pofahl  
Sociologist - volunteer