



Transforming a Community for Action:

Hmong Americans in the Milwaukee Area

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August 2016

The Hmong Milwaukee Civic Engagement Project (THMCEP)
A collaboration between Southeast Asian Educational Development, Inc. (SEAED), UW-Milwaukee Hmong Diaspora Studies Program, and Hmong American Peace Academy (HAPA)

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**Funding for The Hmong Milwaukee Civic Engagement Project (THMCEP) is provided by
the Greater Milwaukee Foundation.**

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the financial support of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation (GMF). The partner organizations thank the GMF for investing in our community. We also thank advisory committee members for assisting with data collection by organizing storytelling circles, administering the asset inventory, and reviewing and providing feedback on report drafts. While all members contributed to the process, we would like to especially thank Thai Xiong for his commitment to the project. As a leader in the Xiong clan, he played an instrumental role in connecting us with clan and cultural leaders whose perspectives greatly enhanced this study.

In addition to research and data collection, Ann Graf assisted with report preparation and provided program support. Andrew Xiong helped with data collection, in particular serving as note taker for circles conducted in Hmong language with elders. Tommy CheeMou Yang prepared the census tract map of Hmong concentrations in the city of Milwaukee.

This study also benefitted from oral history interviews that Dr. Chia Youyee Vang and her students conducted with community members in Milwaukee from Summer 2014 to Summer 2015. Six undergraduate students and one former student worked with her to conduct oral history interviews. The undergraduate students were funded by the UW-Milwaukee Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR). They included Kazoua Mary Vang, Neng Vang, Lao Lorlong Vue, Wendy Ciasiab Vue, Jeremy Weber, and Tujntsuj Laujxeb Yang. Shoua Lee had graduated but volunteered his time to help conduct interviews. Some interviewee comments are included in this report.

Finally, we thank the key informant interviewees, storytelling circle participants, asset inventory respondents, and oral history interviewees for sharing their experiences and perspectives with us.

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PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Southeast Asian Educational Development, Inc.



Southeast Asian Educational Development, Inc. (SEAED) is a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to create a thriving Southeast Asian American community in the Milwaukee area. Southeast Asian Americans came to the United States as refugees beginning in the mid-1970s. During the first couple of decades, they focused on survival by obtaining English skills, learning trades, and finding employment to support their families. In operation since 2014, SEAED provides educational programs focusing on preventative health, civic engagement, and economic development.

Hmong Diaspora Studies Program-University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee



The Hmong Diaspora Studies Program at UW-Milwaukee was established in 2009. It provides undergraduate students with multidisciplinary perspectives on and knowledge of Hmong history, culture, and contemporary life. Without a nation state of their own, Hmong people live as minorities in Asia, Europe, Oceania, and North and South America. Their life experiences Hmong people differ significantly depending on the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions of specific locations. Consistent with UWM's commitment to preparing students to become well-informed global citizens, the Hmong Diaspora Studies Program enables students to compare and contrast the experiences of people of Hmong ethnicity throughout the world.

Hmong American Peace Academy



In 2004, Hmong American Peace Academy (HAPA) opened as the first Hmong charter school in Wisconsin. Leaders responded to parents' concerns over the quality of education for their children and parents' interest in maintaining close relationships with their children in order to teach them basic values, exert discipline, and express their love for them. Today, HAPA serves more than 1,500 students and their families throughout city. It provides students with rigorous academics, character development, and Hmong cultural values, preparing them to excel in colleges, universities, and careers. HAPA honors tradition, forges new ground, and explores innovative ideas. It builds bridges, mends fences, brings people together, and creates new opportunities for success.

Executive Summary

This report is an environmental scan of the Hmong community in the Milwaukee area. It is Phase I of a two-year project that aims to build the capacity of former Hmong refugees and their children to become active participants in different sectors of the larger community. The study is based primarily on interviews with key informants, both Hmong and non-Hmong, storytelling circles and oral history interviews with Hmong Americans, supplemented by data drawn from U.S. Census records. The report presents demographic data, a literature review on new American civic participation, and information on the lived experiences, values, practices, challenges, hopes, and dreams of community members in the Milwaukee area. Overall, it is informed by the perspectives of 178 people (96 women and 82 men).

Fleeing war-torn Laos following the Vietnam War, they began arriving in the U.S. as political refugees in the mid-1970s and settled across the country. Many moved from initial settlement locations to reunite with family and friends in other areas or to seek employment and educational opportunities. Their population had grown to more than 260,000 by 2010 and the Milwaukee area's nearly 12,000 makes it the fourth largest concentration of Hmong Americans. During the last 40 years, community members have worked tirelessly to rebuild their lives. They have formed community-based organizations and religious institutions to provide services to families and many have advocated for the maintenance of Hmong cultural practices.

Literature Review

Relevant literature has provided a picture of Hmong Americans as politically and civically engaged at higher rates than their socio-economic status (SES) would predict and at higher rates than surrounding ethnic minorities and immigrant groups in cities where they reside in larger numbers, such as in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California. While gender does not correlate with political engagement, a number of Hmong American women are and have been involved in various levels of government, as well as in Hmong and larger community leadership roles. Some scholars have gone so far as to say that the Hmong may have a cultural affinity for government and political participation. The community places a high value on education and views service in government office as a position of honor, thus encouraging their children to be involved in politics. Unlike other locations in Wisconsin and in other states with large Hmong populations, however, no individual has sought elected office in the Milwaukee area. A few people have been appointed to serve on various commissions and committees and some have mobilized around various issues that affect members of their community while others have met with elected officials who reached out to them.

Study participants offered a wide range of opinions about life in the Milwaukee area, viewpoints and experiences with leadership, and anticipated challenges and vision for the future. Key findings include the following:

Perspectives on Hmong Life in the Milwaukee Area

- Although no Hmong American has sought elected office in the Milwaukee area, the local community had engaged in a variety of efforts to advocate for resources for their community and to seek justice when tragic incidents occurred. Leaders worked with faith-based and mainstream organizations and local and state

government to ensure that basic needs were met. They encouraged family and friends to relocate to this area from other parts of the state and across the country.

- When asked why they have chosen to live in this area, the most common responses were family, jobs, and education opportunities. The vast majority moved to the area because they wanted to be near their extended families. Others moved here for jobs and education, especially from smaller Wisconsin cities. Most of the high school and college students interviewed were born in Milwaukee or came to Milwaukee for school.
- Those who felt that Milwaukee was a welcoming environment attributed it to community members' ability to find jobs and the willingness of Hmong to help other Hmong people. The vast majority indicated that the Milwaukee area is not welcoming due to the following factors: racial prejudice and intra-ethnic animosity.
- When asked how Hmong are viewed in the larger community, a range of opinions were provided. Many pointed out that Hmong have been viewed negatively by others, resulting largely from their socioeconomic position in society and the fact that people in the larger community have limited knowledge about their ethnic group. Some believe that attitudes toward Hmong people have changed over time in both directions.
- Some variations exist between what Hmong participants view as strengths of the community and what non-Hmong interviewees perceive. When participants were asked to discuss what assets the Hmong community possesses, they identified personal traits and cultural values as key strengths. The two most common assets highlighted across interviews and storytelling circles are strong family ties and good work ethics.
- When asked to identify the most pressing issues for Hmong in the Milwaukee area, challenges at the individual, Hmong community, and larger community/societal level were identified. They include: incohesive Hmong community; lack of representation/acknowledgment in the larger community; intergenerational challenges; lack of focus on greater good; drug and alcohol abuse; parenting/family problems, health challenges, Hmong humility; integration issues/poverty; crime and safety; gender inequality; Hmong culture and traditions; and limited outlet for disseminating community news.

Viewpoints and Experiences with Leadership

- When asked who they turn to for support when there are non-life threatening issues and why the specific source, participants overwhelmingly state that they seek help from family members. Parents and siblings were the most frequently mentioned. Most young participants indicated that they also depend on close friends who understand what they are going through because they are at the same stage in life.

- When asked to share who came to mind when they thought about leaders, the most common responses include mainstream elected officials, in particular President Obama, followed by immediate family members, clan leaders, General Vang Pao (deceased), Hmong individuals from elsewhere, and nonprofit leaders.
- Participants identified the following characteristics of a good leader: open-minded and serve all; visionary, possess integrity and trustworthy; good communicator/listener; knowledgeable, educated, and credible; fair and flexible; and prioritize greater good/passionate.
- While it is fairly easy for participants to identify people that come to mind when they think about leaders and characteristics of good leaders, participants struggle when asked to identify Hmong community leaders in the Milwaukee area. A few mentioned their clan leader but the majority said they did not know who the leaders are. Some explain that it is due to their lack of involvement in the Hmong community while others simply say there are no visible leaders. Non-clan leaders acknowledge the existence of clan leaders, but very few are able to name their clan leader or any other leaders. Some simply provided names of church leaders, shamans, elders, Hmong professionals, advocates, and student organization officers.

Anticipated Challenges and Vision for the Future

- Future challenges that participants believe Hmong Americans in the Milwaukee area will face include issues confronting other Americans, balancing Hmong cultural practices with societal expectations, having a disengaged educated class, and struggling with lack of motivation, especially among the younger generation.
- Participants' vision for the Hmong community in the next five to ten years consists of increased collaboration within the Hmong community, effective Hmong leadership, increased economic power, increased representation/participation in the larger community, increased positive visibility in the larger community, presence of political power, establishment of a mobilized community for action, effective ways to maintain Hmong culture and traditions, availability of resources to empower Hmong community members, and outlets for sharing information.

Based on the findings, the following are recommended steps to be taken:

- Create a coalition of interested stakeholders to identify, cultivate, and nurture individuals to represent Hmong interests in the larger community;
- Develop a multigenerational leadership training program that includes Hmong and larger community values that lead to a united and empowered Hmong American community;
- Compile a directory of local clan and sub-clan representatives and raise awareness about their roles and responsibilities;

- Develop opportunities that will lead to greater communication and cooperation within the Hmong American community;
- Identify ways to make Hmong contributions more visible; and
- Establish a mentoring program for parents and children that will enable them to maintain Hmong culture and traditions.

Introduction

For four decades, thousands of Hmong from Laos have settled in the Milwaukee area, fleeing from war and political unrest that resulted from decolonization processes and Cold War conflicts. U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia during the second half of the twentieth century played a significant role in facilitating the resettlement of Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees to the United States. Since 1975, more than one million refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have resettled in the U.S., many of whom arrived with little or no formal education. As a result, some remain impoverished, unemployed, and less-educated than the average American (U.S. Census 2000, 2010). Most have largely focused on meeting basic needs. Although the Milwaukee area is home to the fourth largest U.S. Hmong population, awareness of the Hmong in the broader community is generally low. Members of their community often become part of the public consciousness because of media coverage of negative news about Hmong culture and traditions. Unlike populations in locations such as the Twin Cities who participate widely in all levels of society, the Milwaukee Hmong community remains largely invisible to the larger community.

The Hmong Milwaukee Civic Engagement Project (THMCEP) is a step to collectively overcome feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness about the problems the community faces. The overarching goal is to build the capacity of former Hmong refugees and their children to become active participants in different sectors of the larger community. Partner organizations believe that there are untapped assets in the Hmong community, and by providing tools, resources, and training, Hmong Americans can contribute to building a stronger Milwaukee. We see this project as laying the groundwork for a Hmong community that is equipped to help solve social problems and build impactful organizations. By working together on public issues, Hmong Milwaukeeans will further enrich the culturally diverse Milwaukee community. THMCEP includes two phases: 1) conducting an environmental scan, and 2) establishing a community leadership training program. This report is the result of the environmental scan of the Hmong Milwaukee community. Findings from Phase I will be used to develop an intergenerational leadership training pilot program to be carried out in Phase II. The purpose of this report is to present information on the lived experiences, values, practices, challenges, and hopes and dreams of Hmong community members in the Milwaukee area. Chapter 1 outlines the plan for the study. Chapter 2 provides a brief history of Hmong migration to the United States and their settlement in the Milwaukee area. In Chapter 3, a review of relevant literature on immigrant civic participation and leadership is discussed. Chapters 4-6 present the findings, and recommendations are outlined in Chapter 7.

Chapter 1

Plan for the Study

This study is based primarily on interviews with key informants, both Hmong and non-Hmong, storytelling circle discussions and oral history interviews with Hmong Americans, supplemented by demographic data drawn from U.S. Census records, and a review of the literature on new American civic participation. Data collection took place from January to June 2016. Key informants include elected officials and community leaders who either work directly with Hmong clients or held positions that impact the local Hmong community. Twenty key informant interviews were completed. Seventeen took place at interviewees' office or home and three were conducted by telephone. One hundred and forty-eight individuals participated in 24 storytelling circles, which were held in homes, community organizations, high school and college/university campuses, churches, and businesses. Table 1 and Table 2 describe the characteristics of the key informant interviewees and storytelling circle participants. To gather information about human capital in the local Hmong American community, an asset inventory was administered online and in person. From March through the end of June, 170 individuals completed the asset inventory.¹ This project also benefited from oral history interviews that Dr. Chia Youyee Vang and her students conducted from Summer 2014 to Summer 2015 with nearly 60 community members in Milwaukee. Ten interviewees' experiences are incorporated into this report. Overall, the report is informed by the perspectives of 178 people (96 women and 82 men).

Table 1: Key Informants

Background	Total
Elected Officials	3
Education Professionals	6
Government	2
Nonprofit/Community Leaders	9
Total	20

Source: Author Tabulation

Table 2: Storytelling Circle Participants

Background	Total
Blue Collar Workers	25
Christian Pastors	4
Clan/community/cultural leaders	35
College Students	32
High School Students	11
Stay at Home Parents/Unemployed	5
Young Professionals-Business Owners	6
Young Professionals-Education	8
Young Professionals-Private Sector	18
Young Professionals-Social Service	4
Total	148

Source: Author Tabulation

Chapter 2

Hmong Migration to the U.S. and Settlement in the Milwaukee Area

Milwaukee has a rich history of ethnic diversity. Poles, Italians, Jews, Germans, African Americans, and many others have contributed to the making of this city. It, however, continues to be one of the most racially segregated cities in the nation. Despite nearly 50 years of open housing policies and changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement, many Milwaukeeans today live parallel lives. African Americans and other racial minorities are concentrated in particular neighborhoods, and many find it difficult to move beyond certain geographic areas. Why then did people of Hmong ethnicity, fleeing war torn Laos following American disengagement from Southeast Asia, choose to settle here? What factors influenced their migration and settlement to make the Milwaukee area the fourth largest concentration of Hmong Americans by the new millennium?

The Hmong who came to the U.S. as political refugees beginning in the mid-1970s were from Laos. During the Vietnam War, or American War as the people in Asia call it, the U.S. led a secret war in Laos against communist forces. The 1954 Geneva Peace Accord and the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos in 1962 prevented the stationing of foreign troops on Lao territory. But as the Cold War in Asia gained momentum, American military leaders enticed many ethnic minorities to support U.S. war efforts in the region. Because of their concentration near the Lao/Vietnamese border, Hmong men and boys were recruited to serve as America's foot soldiers, which came with a high cost. From the early 1960s through 1973 when the U.S. disengaged from the larger Vietnam War, thousands died on the frontline. The air and ground war disrupted Hmong agrarian life and more than a third of its 350,000 population became internally displaced.

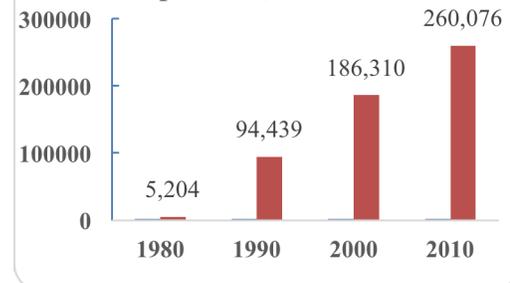
By the end of the war, an estimated 17,000 Hmong combatants had been killed (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999). Thousands more died as they fled to seek refuge in neighboring Thailand. Since the mid-1970s, more than 140,000 Hmong refugees have been resettled in the United States. Overall, they represent about 10 percent of the 1.3 million Vietnam War refugees who sought refuge in this country. As shown in Chart 1, their population has increased exponentially over the last four decades.

In the mid-1970s, U.S. refugee resettlement policies dispersed Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees throughout the country. The Indochina Migration and Assistance Act of 1975 allowed the federal government to subcontract with numerous volunteer agencies, or

Figure 1: Map of Southeast Asia



Chart 1: U.S. Hmong Population, 1980-2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

“volags,” to assist in the resettlement process. The volags were responsible for placing the refugees with Americans willing to serve as sponsors and providing initial counseling. By 1980, it became clear that refugees were encountering enormous challenges adjusting to life in the U.S.; thus, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980. The Act created the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to subcontract with public and private non-profit agencies to more effectively meet the diverse needs of refugees.

The dispersal practices were carried out both in response to the availability of sponsors and to an interest by policymakers in rendering the refugees less visible. While some refugees were placed in rural areas and small towns, the vast majority was funneled into urban centers. Whether refugees remained in the locations where they were initially resettled depended on both personal and larger societal factors. The desire to be near others from their ethnic group as well as to reconnect with extended families that were separated during their flight from Laos resulted in many relocating shortly after arrival in the U.S. The political, social, and economic landscape in certain locations also drove many refugees to move a second or third time to rebuild their lives. As shown in Table 1, dramatic changes occurred from 1990 to 2010 resulting in the Midwest becoming the region with the highest number of Hmong Americans.

In several Midwestern locations, Asian American populations consist of slightly different demographic groups than in the coastal regions. While more established groups such as Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Asian Indians, and Koreans dominate among Asian Americans in New York and California, Hmong are the largest Asian groups in Minnesota and Wisconsin. California continues to have the largest Hmong American population (91,224), followed by Minnesota (66,181) and Wisconsin (49,240) (U.S. Census, 2010). Whereas in California they are a very small percentage of the large Asian American population, Hmong represent 36 percent of Wisconsin’s Asian American population (*Hmong in Wisconsin: A Statistical Overview*. 2015. Applied Population Laboratory & UW-Extension).

In 1990, there were only 16,980 Hmong in Wisconsin, but in 2000 the population had more than doubled (36,809). The rate of growth from 2000 to 2010 was lower than from 1990 to 2000, but it was still a significant increase (49,240, including those with multi-racial background). Unlike Minnesota’s population that is concentrated in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, Hmong in Wisconsin are dispersed throughout the state. Table 2 illustrates the presence of Hmong populations in Wisconsin.

Table 1: U.S. Hmong Population Change by Region, 1990-2010

Region	1990	2000	2010
South	1,272	11,645	24,230
Midwest	38,796	91,034	126,713
Northeast	1,941	3,781	3,860
West	52,430	79,850	105,270
Total	94,439	186,310	260,073

Source: *The State of the Hmong American Community*

Table 2: Hmong Concentrations in Wisconsin, 2010

County	Persons
Milwaukee	10,917
Marathon	5,644
Sheboygan	4,046
Dane	4,016
Brown	3,912
Outagamie	3,249
La Crosse	3,058
Winnebago	2,223
Eau Claire	2,181
Manitowoc	1,518
Portage	1,232
Dunn	795
Wood	685
Calumet	662
Remaining counties	2,989
TOTAL	47,127

Source: *U.S. Census 2010 (Hmong Alone)*

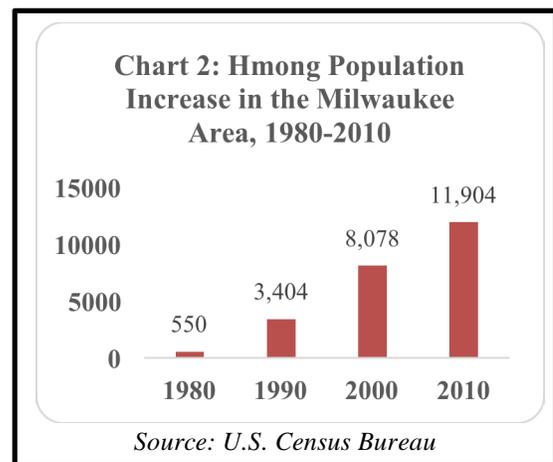
Resettlement Experiences

Much of the literature on immigrant incorporation suggests that immigrants' experiences depend both on personal initiatives and their access to resources in host communities (Waters, Ueda, and Marrow, 2007). In addition, their experiences differ significantly, depending on whether they live in rural or urban areas. In rural communities throughout the U.S., Hmong refugee families often became the few people of color, and thus stood out in all-white communities. In big cities, refugees often joined other disadvantaged groups in deteriorating neighborhoods. Many experienced aggressions from locals because they were vulnerable newcomers arriving on the turf of more established residents already stressed by social inequality (Hein, 2006: 124). The refugees frequently competed for scarce resources; when unable to find employment, they resorted to public programs designed for the poor in American society. Although refugee policies are established at the international and federal level, state and local government entities have had to shoulder most of the burden for poverty among refugee populations. Once their eligibility for federal support is terminated, refugees are then forced to turn to state and county social programs. Hmong compelled to resort to public aid experience significant shame for their inability to support their families. Similar to the financial challenges that people face today, the dismal economic conditions during the 1980s meant that refugees with limited formal education and language barriers were greatly disadvantaged in the labor force.

Settling in Milwaukee

Although some Hmong refugees who had worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and military officers were able to come to the U.S. in late 1975, it was not until early 1976 that the first group of Hmong refugees was resettled in various locations throughout the country. The Milwaukee area did not receive as many new arrivals as other cities, such as Des Moines, Iowa, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Fresno, California. Between 1975 and 1980 about 2,000 Southeast Asian refugees resettled in the Milwaukee area, of which the Hmong represented slightly more than a quarter. Based on the 1980 Census, out of the total U.S. Hmong population (5,204), 550 lived in the Milwaukee area. Chart 2 reveals that the population increased significantly to 3,404 in 1990 and slightly over 8,000 in 2000, making the Milwaukee metropolitan area the fourth largest concentration of Hmong Americans. The population continued to increase, reaching nearly 12,000 by 2010.² The growth of the population over time was due to secondary migration from other U.S. locations, arrival of additional refugees directly from camps in Thailand, and a higher fertility rate among Hmong Americans than the U.S. population.

The ability of refugees to rebuild their lives was greatly influenced by the generosity of host community members who mobilized to assist refugees. However, in contrast to such responses, other local residents have met their Hmong refugee neighbors with resentment and, to some extent, hatred. For example, Lynne Dearborn found that the Hmong in Milwaukee



experienced severe discrimination in rental housing markets due to their large families, cultural practices, and misunderstandings (2004:16). Furthermore, she noted the following in her study:

The conflicts Hmong study participants have had with non-Hmong neighbors who are not African American tend to result from practice of traditional Hmong religion, the noise and parking congestion during large gatherings of relatives, and the noise created by large numbers of Hmong children (178).

“When you see something positive, you want to make sure that others know about it so that they can benefit as well.”

The challenges that Hmong refugees faced seemed impossible to tackle at first, but as refugee leaders learned survival strategies, they utilized them to help other refugees. Sociologist Jeremy Hein concluded, “What the Hmong accomplished in Milwaukee is remarkable, given that they arrived traumatized by military defeat and subsequent persecution and possessing only the work skills useful in an agrarian economy. Yet they became successful urban pioneers in the toughest neighborhoods and thus contributed to the making of Milwaukee at the end of the twentieth century” (123).

The journey of many Hmong to Milwaukee included stops in other Wisconsin cities and towns, as well as other states and/or countries. Ger Vang, long-time resident in the Milwaukee area and former president of the Lao Family Community (LFC) organization, described the path he took to arrive in Milwaukee and why he has remained since:

I came to the U.S. in June 1979. I first went to Fond du Lac, but there were no jobs for me so I moved to Milwaukee because I knew other Hmong here who said there were more jobs in a big city. At the time, there were so few Hmong families, barely enough to have a gathering. The families I recall being here when I arrived were: Lee Vang (*Lis Vaj*), Ly Cheng (*Lis Ceeb*), Va Yang (*Vaj Yaj*), Nao Shoua Xiong (*Nom Suav Xyooj*), Chue Blong Vang (*Tswv Nplooj Vaj*). The population increased because each of us would recruit our relatives from other locations. (Ger Vang, Counselor at Milwaukee Area Technical College)

Lang Xiong, former board president of Shee Yee Community (a non-profit cultural organization) and former staff member at the Hmong American Friendship Association (HAFA) shared similar reasons for moving to Milwaukee. He had resettled in France in 1979, but immigrated to the U.S. in 1981. His relatives lived in Manitowoc, so he first settled there. Having been among the small group of young Hmong who went school in Laos, he wanted to pursue professional work opportunities. Within the same year, he decided to move to Milwaukee and enrolled at the Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE). He explained:

Milwaukee is a larger city. There were more education opportunities. Once here, Hmong families recruited one another. As we say in Hmong, *sib nqug* (pull each other) is very important. When you see something positive, you want to make sure that others know about it so that they can benefit as well.

Sharing information about the advantages and disadvantages of different U.S. locations was common. When refugees found a welcoming environment, they recruited friends and relatives to join them. If particular cities and towns did not have resources that enabled refugees to support themselves, then they often discouraged others from settling there. Charles Choj Vang

first came to Colorado. He had heard from friends about more generous support for refugees to obtain formal education in Milwaukee. He stated:

I'm not ashamed to tell the truth. My wife and I were very young in 1987. We had heard from friends and relatives that in Wisconsin, you can be on public assistance and attend school. When you're attending school, you would also have access to child care for your children. That is the truth about why we moved here. We needed temporary help so that we can prepare to help ourselves for the rest of our lives. (Charles Vang)

“I can't think of any better place than Milwaukee that offers you good education, different kinds of jobs, and all kinds of restaurants.”

The temporary assistance that Charles and his wife, Mai, received enabled them to become economically self-sufficient not long after their arrival in Milwaukee. Charles worked with local nonprofit organizations for a while and then started his own insurance agency and went on to co-found the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce (HWCC) where he served as director until 2015.

How Dr. Douglas Vue, who is a School of Pre-college Education instructor at Milwaukee Area Technical College, and his wife, Michelle, ended up in this area reflects the stories of many immigrants before them. Douglas grew up in Eau Claire and after high school he signed up for a teacher training program in Illinois. It was in the Chicago area that he and Michelle met. They married when she was very young and shortly thereafter, moved to Milwaukee. After many years, they moved to South Milwaukee and then eventually settled in Oak Creek. The following are their accounts of why they have remained in this area:

I grew up in a small town, but I have lived in big cities. I do like the Cudahy and Oak Creek area, especially around Grant Park. It's so beautiful. You can go to downtown Milwaukee and there are big buildings and just minutes away, you are on the UWM campus. The lakefront has great views. It's like Hawaii or Florida! People go to the beach. I can't think of any better place than Milwaukee that offers you good education, different kinds of jobs, and all kinds of restaurants. (Douglas Vue)

Milwaukee is a place that when you are from elsewhere and you don't know, it may seem like it's so big and you can't survive. But, when we moved here, we chose an area with lots of people from diverse backgrounds. We lived near Greenfield and 10th Street. My parents and siblings were all still in Chicago. When my husband and I moved to Milwaukee, we were the third Vue family here. It was jobs and family that attracted us and our family and friends to Milwaukee. Not too long after we came here, the number of Vue families grew to more than 30. My parents and siblings also moved here from Chicago. I think Milwaukee is a place with lots of opportunities. If you are motivated to work hard, you can do well. (Michelle Vue)

Attorney Yeng Kong Lee owns his own business in Milwaukee. His family arrived in Denver, Colorado in 1979, and moved to Milwaukee in 1985. He explains why he likes Milwaukee:

What I like best about living in Milwaukee is that it's home. I think home is where your family lives. So all my brothers live here. My sister doesn't. She got married and moved to Minnesota, but my parents are here and most of my relatives and cousins are here. (Yeng Kong Lee)

Other oral history interviewees shared the following diverse reflections about how they and their families settled in this area:

I was born in Long Cheng, Laos and lived in a Thai refugee camp before coming to America. We came to the U.S. in 1980 when I was 15. I didn't make any decision. I just came with my sister and her family. They just said 'let's go' and I just followed. I was scared. I cried too because I missed my mom. I wondered if I would ever have a chance to see my parents again. I was fifteen, but still, I was considered a baby. I didn't want to come at all, but the elders just kept saying it's for my future. (Nikki Vue).

In Thailand, I heard others say that this country was a good country and that it was a country that loved people like us, so it was a country that gave us freedom/independence that it loved its citizens. So living in a country that was very poor, I wanted to come to this country and see how it was. We came in 2001 and just stayed in Milwaukee. There is a lot of diversity and it's comfortable here. It's likable and it's fair and gives us a lot of freedom to do what we desire. (Ai Xiong)

I came from Thailand to Milwaukee and I've been here since the mid-1980s. I followed my relatives here and I have never moved anywhere else because of my extended family members in Milwaukee. (Xao Vang)

I came to the U.S. in 1989 when I was 8. We were in Fresno for four years before moving to Milwaukee in 1993. The reason my father came here is because of the job opportunity because back in California you have to have high education to get a decent job. Everybody wants that decent job. They don't have all those factory jobs so my dad moved up here because Charles' dad moved up here and they say there's a lot of jobs up here, so my dad just moved up here so he can get a job and support us. (Nathan Her)

My grandma and uncle were already here in Milwaukee. They came to pick us up from the airport and we went straight to their house. We lived with them for a while. They took us to register for school and for other things that we needed. Because we didn't know how to drive a car, we were dependent on my grandma and uncle. Then, my dad decided to go learn how to drive a car. After a year or something like that, he learned how to drive. So then we moved to an apartment and didn't live with our grandma and uncle anymore. (Youa Chang).

I was born in MN in August 1996. My family moved to Milwaukee, WI in April 2004 so I was mostly raised here in Milwaukee... What I like best about Milwaukee is that the house prices aren't that high and there are resources to help those with low income. My family gardens from spring until fall. So we will practically be at the garden fighting with the weeds and watering the vegetables all day long. (Mee Xiong).

I was born and raised in Milwaukee. I was born in December and that meant having to unfortunately start school later than others, and all of the schools that I have attended are in Milwaukee. My first school was Wisconsin Avenue School, not surprisingly, located on Wisconsin Avenue. I was there for kindergarten and I remember the only reason why I was able to get so comfortable there was because my teacher was Hmong. She was extremely nice, caring, and spoke both Hmong and English. Since English is my second language, she spoke Hmong to calm me down whenever I had a bad day at school. (Koyoua Vang)

Similar to resettlement practices in other urban areas, housing affordability determined where Hmong refugees would concentrate. In Lynne M. Dearborn's study with Hmong program participants, she found that Hmong goals, ideals, conditions, and experiences that influence them are tied to specific cultural characteristics and experiences (Dearborn, 2004: 5). She identified the following six cultural characteristics influencing residential choices: (1) large household size, (2) extended household structure, (3) strong kinship ties, (4) Hmong traditional religion, (5) Hmong desire to maintain ethnic identity, and (6) swidden agriculturalism. Furthermore, she outlined four life conditions that influenced residential choices: (1) economic marginality, (2) feeling unsafe because of crime, (3) discrimination, and (4) lack of control over use and physical

“My family gardens from spring until fall. So we will practically be at the garden fighting with the weeds and watering the vegetables all day long.”

quality of residential movements (Dearborn, 2004: 7). Dearborn's findings suggest that Hmong refugees exercised some agency in their housing selection. Many moved out of the inner city to the northwest area due to experience with violent crimes (Dearborn, 2004: 162). Jeremy Hein also found that Hmong in Milwaukee became targets of violent crimes due to their vulnerability. Sources of constraint faced by Hmong in residential choices include language barriers, limited financial resources, and lack of knowledge of rights and responsibilities (Hein, 2006: 106-118).

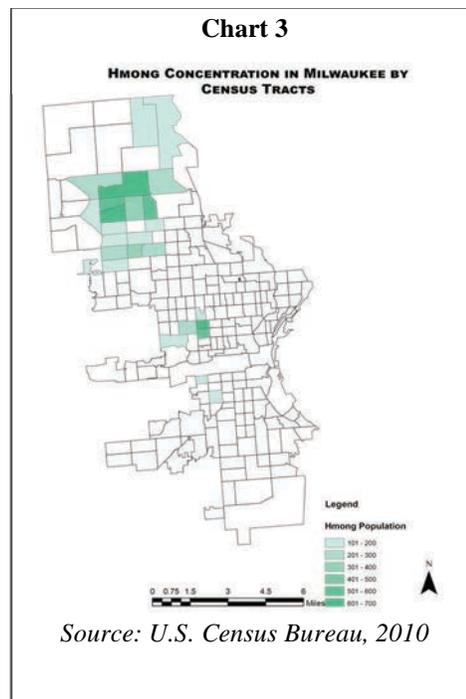
Initially, the Hmong population settled in the south side of Milwaukee, but homeownership and business opportunities in the near northwest side attracted many to relocate. By 2000, Hmong lived in eight census tracts in Milwaukee. Census tracts 96, 97, and 122 have the highest concentration of Hmong in Milwaukee (Dearborn, 2004: 22-23). According to Lang Xiong, settlement patterns began to change significantly for Hmong in Milwaukee beginning in the early 1990s. Housing everywhere was becoming expensive. Hmong families would try to buy homes on the south side but they found that homes in better condition on the north side were more affordable. Therefore, many moved to zip code 53218. Lang further described Hmong residential patterns as partially influenced by economic mobility and partially by cultural preferences:

Economic mobility has allowed some Hmong to have greater housing choices. So, some move to the suburbs. However, there are some who have the financial means to flee from the inner city, but choose not to do so. Many Hmong have the mentality that our family size and our ways of doing things make us stand out. In the city, it is easier to blend in with the rest of society. But, in the suburbs where it is mostly white people, we stand out. Some people give us strange look. Therefore, some Hmong just choose not to put themselves in those situations. (Lang Xiong)

On one hand, the market and Hmong economic status affected their housing decisions. On the other hand, homeownership programs within Milwaukee dictated where they would set down roots. In the late 1980s, Lao Family Community worked with the City of Milwaukee to establish a home ownership program to purchase run-down, drug homes in the Walnut Hill and Cherry Court areas. Homes were bought for one dollar and then owners rehabbed them with Housing and Urban Development (HUD) loans. This program contributed to the revitalization of these poor inner city neighborhoods. Another example is the collaboration of St. Rose, St. Francis, and St. Michael's Catholic Churches where St. Michael's established the Landmark Housing Program in 1991 to promote home ownership among low and moderate income immigrant and minority populations. Many Lao and Hmong refugees were served by the program.

Community Building

Once Hmong refugees overcame the shock of migrating to a land very different from their birth place, some explored the various opportunities available to help them establish



permanent roots. A common practice was to informally gather to discuss their experiences in the new land. Upon uncovering the challenges their co-ethnics faced, leaders emerged to find ways to respond to their needs. Eventually, the informal meetings turned into establishment of formal organizations to provide the much needed services. Similar to community formation processes in other U.S. locations, Hmong in Milwaukee formed their own self-help organizations. Ger Vang reflected on how the LFC organization was founded:

In 1980, we started an organization and we called it Hmong Association of Milwaukee. By the time we were ready to register it, we had changed the name to Lao Family Community because General Vang Pao had created the Lao Family organization in California. In the beginning, we all just volunteered. It was only after the federal government decided to fund our organization with \$30,000 to help our refugees adjust to life in America that we were able to pay a staff.

Ger Vang further suggested that, in these early years, the organization played a role in attracting others to the area. When they heard about the resources, they moved to Milwaukee. Some even came in groups. While the first refugees appeared to have come together for a common purpose, they were not immune to internal differences. Not long after forming LFC, some of the board leaders went on to establish the Hmong American Friendship Association (HAFA) in 1983. According to one of HAFA's founders, Nengmay Vang, the population was increasing so more services were needed (HAFA Founder/former staff and Founder/former Pastor of Hmong First Baptist Church). Although it had a satellite office in the St. Michael's Good Samaritan building on Vliet Street, the LFC offices were located on Vieau Place on the south side while HAFA is located on Vliet Street on the north side of Milwaukee. With similar missions, both organizations served the Hmong Milwaukee community and have occasionally collaborated on various activities. LFC closed its doors around 2010 due to lack of funding while HAFA continues to offer a variety of support services and cultural programs. Services include the following: elderly support, family strengthening, food pantry, homebuyer assistance, job placement, and youth . In its efforts to preserve Hmong culture and traditions, HAFA established a small museum displaying Hmong arts and artifacts. Additionally, it has served as the anchor organization in the Hmong Consortium that hosts the annual Milwaukee Hmong New Year attended by approximately 10,000 people.

The third organization that Hmong Americans created in Milwaukee is Shee Yee Community.³ According to Lang Xiong, Shee Yee Community was founded in 1987 by Chai Pao Xiong (*Nchaiv Pov Xyooj*), Wang Chao Xiong (*Vaam Choj Xyooj*), and Victor N. Xiong. They realized that there was a need to preserve Hmong culture as an integral part of adjusting to their lives in America. Its primary purpose was to preserve Hmong cultural identity and it has provided services in the following areas: cultural education, translation and interpretation, cultural competency and counseling, Hmong ritual referral, youth leadership development/mentoring, language, and musical instrument classes. It currently has no funding and is operated by volunteers. The organization is co-located at the HAFA building and remains an important partner in the Hmong Consortium to host the Milwaukee Hmong New Year.

Education support and cultural preservation are two areas around which Hmong in Milwaukee also mobilized. Regarding the former, community members consisting of mostly college students established the nonprofit organization Hmong Educational Advancement (HEA) in 1991 and two years later it became incorporated. According to former executive director, Ge Xiong, HEA's mission was "to help members of the Milwaukee Southeast Asian community achieve a meaningful and successful life in American society."⁴ It promoted educational and

career success, supported business and economic development, and encouraged strong families. Ge Xiong recounts:

HEA's greatest impact was on children's educational achievement through after school and summer programs, which it operated in partnership with Milwaukee Public Schools and the City of Milwaukee. In our efforts to build strong families, Dao Vang, HEA President, volunteered to work with the Internal Revenue Service's Volunteer Income Tax program. This helped to put money back into the pockets of hundreds of SEA families. Our least successful program was the Gang Diversion program in which success per case unit was low. Therefore, I strongly emphasized prevention as opposed to intervention services. I left the organization in December 2003 due to personal stress of being the executive director, grant writer, program supervisor/developer. Hmong community-based organizations are largely misunderstood by community members for their services and what they really represent. (Ge Xiong)

Due to the lack of funding and the availability of support services from other institutions, HEA closed its doors in 2005.⁵

The other Hmong nonprofit organization that is still in operation today is the Hmong American Women's Association (HAWA), which was founded in 1993. Co-founder and first HAWA board president, Mayhoua Moua, shares the following account about how HAWA was established:

The idea of a Hmong woman organization was formed by two sisters, May Vue Lor and May Shoua Thao, in February 1993. May Vue shared the idea with me. At the time, I worked for Lao Family Community, Inc. as a job developer at the north side branch at 2414 West Vliet Street. I called a few friends and the friends called their friends and the first meeting was held at the Sixteenth Street Community Health Clinic (SSCHC) WIC reception area. Attendees included myself, May Vue Lor, Pasong L. Vang, Chue Ly, Youa V. Xiong, Mailue Lor, Kathy X. Vang, Mai Zong Vue, Joua V. Moua, Nor Y. Xiong and Choua Y. Xiong. The purpose of the organization was to empower Hmong American women to take on leadership roles toward self-sufficiency. Strategic meetings continued at various sites through May, 1993 when the first board of directors were elected in the St. Michael Church hall. The officers included the following: President Mayhoua Moua (served 2 consecutive terms), Vice-President Youa V. Xiong, Secretary Xai Xiong, and Treasurer Joua V. Moua. Members of the initial board of directors were Nor Y. Xiong, Mailue Lor, Kathy Vang, and Choua Y. Xiong. During 1995-96, we received our first grant with UW-Extension, Family Education division serving as fiscal agency. HAWA obtained 501 C (3) status in 1996 with the assistance of then Congressman Tom Barrett's attorney. We invited Kalyani Rai to join the HAWA board in 1996. In 1997, HAWA submitted its first independent proposal and was awarded. I was hired as the first program manager. (Mayhoua Moua)

Community-based organizations provided much-needed support for refugees, but they also relied on existing cultural and religious networks. In animist traditions, the place of worship is in the home and spiritual healers are needed to diagnose and cure illnesses. Since the majority of Hmong Americans continue to practice ancestor worship, it is essential that people live near their immediate family and clan members in order to have access to shamans and elders knowledgeable about animist rituals. In their community formation efforts, a segment of the Milwaukee Hmong population has invested tremendous time and energy in building Christian churches. In the late 1970s, the number of Hmong Christians in the U.S. was estimated to be 1,525 (Vang, 2008: 38). By 2000, estimates of Hmong Christians ranged from 10 to 50 percent of the U.S. Hmong population (Ranard, 2004). In Milwaukee, Christians were estimated to be about 28 percent (Lo, 2001). Hmong Christians have embraced a wide spectrum of denominations: Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, and evangelical (Hein, 2006: 121). The largest congregation in Milwaukee is the Grace Hmong Alliance Church, which has over 1000 members. A partial list of area churches includes Hmong First Baptist Church, Hmong Hope

Lutheran, Hmong Christian Community United Methodist, and New Hope Hmong United Methodist. Hmong congregations also worship at Ascension Lutheran Church and St. Michael’s Catholic Church.

Ethnic religious organizations and clan associations have played an important supporting role in helping Hmong Americans adjust to U.S. society. Having had very little access to educational opportunities in Laos, only a very small number arrived with postsecondary education, resulting in significant language barriers in the early years. That, however, would change as adults attended ESL classes and children enrolled in school. Despite the fact that most were unfamiliar with the American educational system, they associate higher education with economic success, and thus, they encourage their children to do well in school. The proportion of Hmong Americans age 25 or older who possess a bachelor’s degree or high rose from 4.9% in 1990 to 7.4% in 2000 and 13.4% in 2010 (*State of the Hmong American Community*, 30). As shown in Table 3, our asset inventory found that of the respondents who answered the question, more than 50 percent had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher while more than 40% had completed at least high school. About three percent of respondents possess Hmong cultural skills.⁶

As discussed earlier, Milwaukee’s Hmong population is heavily concentrated within its city limits; therefore, the majority of Hmong American children attend inner city public schools. Although they choose to live in the city of Milwaukee, some Hmong parents send their children to suburban schools through the Chapter 220 program. Unlike the Twin Cities where more than a dozen Hmong-focused charter schools exist, only one has been established in Milwaukee. Founder, Chris Her-Xiong, shared that Hmong American Peace Academy (HAPA) was established in 2004 by a group of community leaders concerned about the quality of education for Hmong children. Hmong educators and community leaders collectively joined forces to establish the school. Some of these pioneers included Rev. Yong Xeng Yang, Jeff Nha Yia Yang, Gwaub Thao, Jay Chong Zeb Xiong and the Board of Governance of the Grace Hmong Alliance Church. In addition to academic success, they were interested in ensuring that Hmong cultural values be an integral part of children’s education. As with any new initiative, some education leaders in the larger community questioned the leaders’ ability to operate the school. It opened with 200 students and has grown

Table 3: Education Attainment among Asset Inventory Respondents, N=158

Degree	Percentage
Graduate (PhD, MD, EDD, etc...)	3 (1.90%)
Graduate (MA, JD, etc...)	22 (13.92%)
BA/BS	61 (38.61%)
Associate degree/Trade School	21 (13.29%)
High School	46 (29.11%)
Hmong cultural practices (mej koob, txiv qeej, etc...)	5 (3.16%)
Total	158 (100%)

Source: Author’s Tabulation



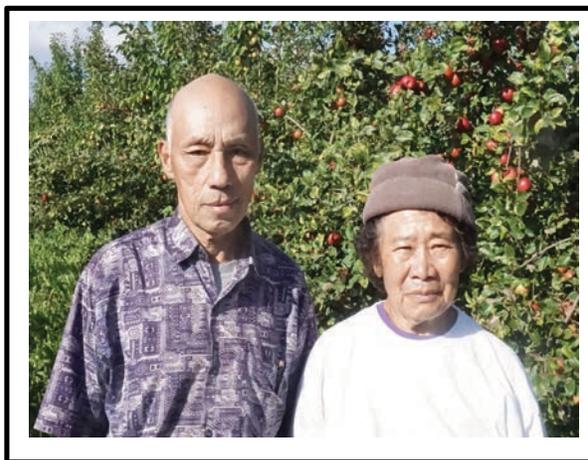
to more than 1500. The school serves children from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade and operates on two locations in Milwaukee. With increasing academic performance and a supportive learning environment, HAPA has received many awards and recently have been recognized locally and nationally. Some of its initial critics have since become champions for the school.

At the post-secondary level, Hmong American students have access to numerous institutions in the area, as well as in neighboring cities. Over 700 students of Hmong ethnicity are enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, more than any other campus in the UW system. Of this number, more than three dozen are pursuing graduate studies. The next largest Hmong enrollment is found at Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), where several hundred students attend. Smaller numbers are found in other institutions, including Alverno College, Marquette University, Concordia University and Mount Mary College.

Business Development

While social, cultural, education, and religious organizations play a major role in Hmong life, Hmong in Milwaukee have also become entrepreneurs and many are professionals in mainstream institutions. Small businesses that cater to their community are the most common enterprises. They range from grocery stores to insurance and translation agencies, to chiropractic clinics. The growth of businesses led to the establishment of the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce HWCC in 2006. Its mission is “to build a strong Hmong business network throughout Wisconsin in which members can share successes, discuss challenges, seek support and work with a unified front for the success of the entire Hmong community.” Some sample Hmong-own businesses include Milwaukee’s expanded Asian Markets Phongsavan, Dr. Cha Lee Medical Clinic, Hampton Asian Foods, Highlander Home Healthcare, CY and CV Construction, LLC, Freedom Home Healthcare, Inspiring Elements, Eagle Real Estate Group, LLC, Charles V. Vang Insurance Agency, Smilee Dental, Lakeview Funeral Home, Xankia Restaurant, My Key Pharmacy, Thai Kitchen, Jackee Milwaukee’s Bar and Restaurant, and Style Cut. Three Hmong American chiropractors have established businesses in the area: Drs. Thai Lee, George N. Lor, and Kham Sing Xiong.

Hmong entrepreneurs are not limited to only professional services. Many have found informal ways to support their families with part-time, seasonal gardening. Most of the area’s 60 Hmong farmers rent land from local farmers. Some work on land in Oak Creek near Ryan Road and others at the Fondy Farm in Port Washington. They drive back and forth between the fields and their homes in Milwaukee. Frequently, elders work on small plots with their children. While seasonal farming does not provide adequate income to the many families involved, elders often use it as a way to teach their children the value of hard work. Although they also previously rented land in Oak Creek, Chue Ge and Youa Yang currently own a 40-acre farm in Hartford, Wisconsin with one of their sons. According to Chue Ge, they were sponsored by Neighborhood Church in Wauwatosa. They arrived in October 1976 and in 1978, they moved to St. Paul, Minnesota to



reunite with their extended family. He and Youa attended English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. He eventually went on to complete a technical degree in machine shop in 1981 while Youa obtained training in assembly work. They found jobs aligned with their respective training, but after working for almost a decade and seeing less knowledgeable co-workers get promoted, Youa decided to rent land to grow vegetables to sell at farmers' markets. During farming season, Chue Ge worked second shift and helped Youa in the morning. In 1989, they moved back to Milwaukee, and after searching for more than a decade, they bought the farm in Hartford in 2005. Asked why they bought the farm and what they liked about it, each joyfully explained:

We've dreamed of having our own farm for a long time. We have three sons and two daughters so we thought that it would be a good investment for our children. It's definitely hard work, but it's great living in the country. I don't have to worry about traffic and people breaking into my house or car. One time in Milwaukee I was so upset because someone stole all four wheels from my car! (Chue Ge Yang, owner of Chue Ge Yang Farm and Green House)

There isn't the kind of stress that exists in an assembly job. We don't get to rest much, just from Thanksgiving through early March, but it's ok. Since we built our greenhouses in 2010, we actually don't have time to rest because during winter we're still taking care of plants and herbs. (Youa Yang, co-owner of Chue Ge Yang Farm and Green House)

Chue Ge and Youa farm 30 of the 40 acres. They have been able to expand their business each year. They now have three tractors and three greenhouses. In discussing why they built the green houses, Youa stated, "The reason we invested in the green houses was because we literally had to go beg local farmers with green houses to help prepare plants for us. It was so hard and some of them wouldn't even look at us. They didn't want to work with us!" The Yangs sell their produce and fruits on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturdays in West Allis and West Bend. In addition to selling vegetables, each spring they prepare plants that are sold to community members and other Hmong gardeners to transplant. One can find a wide range of vegetables on their farm: tomato, onion, zucchini, cucumber, bell pepper, corn, daikon, and eggplant (several kinds). On the hillside overlooking State Road 175, three varieties of apples can be found: honey crisp, red delicious, and gala. Several rows of Asian pear trees are planted in the middle of the apple orchard. Over the years, they have also had cows and chicken.



Hmong Professionals

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 40% of Hmong Americans in Wisconsin worked in manufacturing jobs. However, the number of Hmong professionals in both public and private sectors has increased slightly as children of former refugees obtain advanced education and training. The greatest growth is concentrated in educational services, health care, and social assistance industries. Although health, social service and education are the most common occupation areas among asset inventory respondents, Table 4 does not accurately mirror state data since the number who work in manufacturing is significantly lower.

While some professionals are in positions that serve Hmong Americans, others are not. The following is a snapshot of the diverse Hmong American professionals in the Milwaukee area: Aily Yang (programmer analyst senior at FIS Global); William J. Xiong (guidance counselor at South Division High School), Wang Chao Lee (Senior Pastor at Grace Hmong Alliance Church), Yeng Kong Lee (attorney), May Vang (assistant professor at UW-Whitewater), Yer Moua-Xiong (medical doctor at Columbia St. Mary's Hospital), Joua Xiong Lee (pharmacist at Walgreens), Sher Xiong (pharmacist at Pick and Save), Logan Vang (vicar at Ascension Lutheran Church), Ahmee Vang (Union Representative, UFCW Local 1473), Leng Lee (licensed social worker at Sebastian Family Psychology Practice), Steven Xiong (Director of Refugee Resettlement at Catholic Charities Milwaukee), Thay Yang (manager of creative services with Milwaukee Public Television), Elvis Thao (musician, actor, and activist who appeared in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*), Toua Thao (officer with Milwaukee Police Department), Nouleng Her (officer with Milwaukee Police Department), Kou Vang (product manager at Rockwell Automation), Mai Shoua Xiong (Human Resource administrator at HAPA and 2016 Wisconsin Teacher of the Year), Maijer Lee (Prenatal Resource Coordinator at Froedtert and Medical College of Wisconsin), May Y. Lee (Assistant District Attorney with Milwaukee County District Attorney's Office), and Pa Muas-Xiong (advisor at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee). Although this is certainly not a comprehensive list, it illustrates the community's increasing entrance into a broad range of fields.

Table 4: Asset Inventory Respondent Occupation Areas, N=146

Area	Total
Health	39 (26.71%)
Social Service	30 (20.54%)
Education	25 (17.13%)
Information/Technology	13 (8.90%)
Banking/Finance/Economic & Business Development	13 (8.90%)
Manufacturing/Production	10 (6.84%)
Customer Service-Food Industry	8 (5.47%)
Religious	4 (2.73%)
Engineering	2 (1.37%)
Cultural/Art	2 (1.37%)
Total	146 (100.00%)

Source: Author Tabulation

Chapter 3

Literature Review on Immigrant Civic Participation and Leadership

A review of the literature on the political and civic engagement of Asian American groups in the United States, and more specifically on Hmong, reveals a number of themes and participation goals. An introduction to some popular models of such engagement will be helpful to situate the specific characteristics associated with the Hmong American community within a larger participatory framework.

Political Participation Models

The Socioeconomic Status (SES) model is referenced often as a way to explain or anticipate political participation within demographic groups. This model relies on research data that shows a positive correlation between higher educational attainment and income with a higher rate of voter participation. An interesting anomaly is that of the Asian American immigrant community, which in general arrives in the United States with more education and a corresponding higher SES, yet does not show this association with higher than average voter participation (Doherty 2013, Ecklund and Park 2005, Seo 2011, Huang 2012). The SES model has most often been applied to Asian Americans as an entire group and not to specific ethnic groups within it. Contradictory implications have been found using the model on the Hmong immigrant community for several reasons that are unique to this ethnic group.

While Asian American immigrants may be seen as anomalous in the mismatch between their SES and anticipated voting behavior, this discrepancy may be attributed in part to the model minority stereotype of assumed higher economic and social achievement (Ecklund and Park 2005). Doherty (2013) boils things down by saying that in general the Hmong community in the United States exhibits voting behavior in line with what would be predicted by the SES of the community. He adds that Hmong hold political office at a higher rate than most other minority and refugee groups in the US. Their SES in places like St. Paul, Minnesota is rising so it will be important to watch for any concomitant change in political behavior.

Applying the SES model within the Hmong community itself and not considering the wider Asian American community, Lor (2009) explains that the Hmong of St. Paul have higher SES than Hmong in Fresno, California and also participate politically in much higher percentages than their Fresno co-ethnics. Xiong (2013) claims that there is more at play than just SES to account for Hmong political participation, citing their use of other available resources and well-developed ethnic organizational structures. Doherty (2012) reviews the mobilization model often used with minority voter populations that posits that “minority political participation may respond to the mobilizing of issues and group consciousness more than the individual demographic characteristics of the voter” (133). This would make sense seen alongside the SES model, possibly accounting for the higher than average percentage of Hmong who hold political office despite showing lower than average voting turnout in line with the SES model. As will be discussed in more detail below, Hmong political leadership examples can be seen to inspire confidence in the efficacy of engagement for exacting societal change, and thus may lead to further participation in the political process (Vang 2010, Hein 2014, Hein and Vang 2015, Ferris 1994). This was seen specifically in St. Paul when still more Hmong were motivated to run for political office in the wake of Senator Mee Moua and Representative Cy Thao’s successful campaigns (Hein and Vang 2015).

An interesting point was made by Lor (2009) who noted that immigrants and minorities are often statistically less likely to vote and because of this may not be targeted for political mobilization by candidates. This indicates a type of vicious circle. Because political mobilization has been shown to increase political participation, the very people who already are not as likely to participate are not targeted for mobilization even though that is exactly what they need to become involved. This scenario illustrates the importance of the mobilization model as a means to illuminate not only who may become engaged politically, but who might not.

Themes

A common conception in the literature of civic and political engagement, whether for Hmong or any other group, is that of critical mass, or, more simply, power in numbers. Several studies point to the fact that one of the salient features (among others) of the community in St. Paul where Hmong have been very successful politically is the size of the Hmong population (Hein 2014, Vang 2010, Xiong 2013). Conversely, Andersen (2008) noted that the small size of the Hmong population in Syracuse, NY is not easily recognized by those with the power to effect desired change. The context of a population must also be taken into account such as the makeup of surrounding ethnic groups (Rim 2009). In Fresno there is a sizeable Hmong population, but they are a subgroup of the much larger Asian American population there, and thus they become a minority within that larger community and their numbers do not have the same political efficacy they might wield elsewhere (Lor 2009). In St. Paul not only is there a large concentration of Hmong, but they remain a majority among Asian Americans, immigrants, and other minority groups around them such as Somalis and Hispanics (Mattessich 2000).

Ethnic identity or consensus is an important factor in political mobilization and efficacy (Xiong 2013). When a particular group of people face discrimination or prejudice because of their cultural or ethnic identity, this can sometimes be a force for them to unify and stand up against systems of oppression. “Once mobilized, a community can collectively challenge the practices of a dominant group that perpetuate inequality. ... This behavior is known as ‘collective action’” (Hein 2006, 2008). Collective action is often set in motion as a reaction to shared pressures and challenges that are faced by a community (Yoshikawa 2006; Wong, Lien, and Conway 2005). Ethnic identity may also be leveraged purposefully by a community in order to gain services or resources (Vang 2010) and it may be extended by joining with other ethnic groups who face similar struggles to further engage political activism (Bays 1998, Xiong 2013). While ethnic identity may form as communities coalesce over common issues, it may also be strengthened through the strong leadership of individuals within the community. Former Minnesota state senator Mee Moua is an example of such leadership (Vang 2010, Yoshikawa 2006). Her campaign and election have been cited often in studies on ethnic minority political participation and her success has been seen as an inspiration in the Hmong community toward further political engagement (Hein 2014, Vang 2010). An immigrant community can be greatly mobilized by having one of their own representing them in political office. This type of political success engenders still more confidence in the accessibility and efficacy of the political system and may lead to even more co-ethnic engagement (Lor 2009, Wong 2013, Ferris 1994). Senator Moua’s campaign mobilized the Hmong community through various means. She and her volunteers spent long hours knocking on doors, signing up new voters, explaining the issues and the electoral process in English and in Hmong, and providing transportation to the polls for those who needed it on voting day (Yoshikawa 2006, Lor 2009). In these ways the Hmong community

was directly involved in her political success alongside other organizations and members of the broader community.

The impact of community organizations on civic engagement is felt not only during political campaigns such as Moua's, but often as general resources that can provide access to the local political machinery (Xiong 2013). Social institutions, universities, and other community organizations can be seen to contribute to the organizational capacity of an ethnic community and to act as allies in social and political activism (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). Some community-based organizations serve as direct catalysts for civic engagement by hosting workshops on how to effectively be involved in the political process (Vang 2010). St. Paul, so often cited as a hub of Hmong political and civic activity, has a large number of community organizations, some of which foster, encourage, or enable political participation (Wong 2013). A smaller amount of research has been conducted to determine any effects of gender, age, religion, and naturalization or citizenship status on political and civic participation, though they are often focused on immigrant groups or Asian Americans. Ecklund and Park (2005) looked at Filipinos and Chinese, and found that age did not affect civic participation, nor gender. Those that volunteer in religious organizations tend to volunteer more often in civic organizations as well (Wong et al. 2011). Interestingly they did not find great differences in participation across religions, except among Western religious followers. Specifically there was a noted difference between Protestants and Catholics, but again this research did not specifically focus on Hmong (Ecklund and Park 2005).

While gender does not appear to have any correlation with political participation, at least within the wider Asian American community, it is clear that Hmong American women have had an impact on several levels, from Choua Thao, "the only Lao Family woman board member during the early 1980s," to the election of Choua Lee to the Board of Education in St. Paul in 1992, and the successful Minnesota senate campaign of Mee Moua in 2002, which made her the first Hmong American to hold a state office (Vang 2010, 124, 131). Yoshikawa (2006) writes that the "patriarchal Hmong community in St. Paul supported Mee Moua's campaign," which alludes to the fact that they did so despite her gender (7).

In her 2012 dissertation on political participation among Asian Americans, Huang found that "length of residency (or residential stability), shared culture perceptions, 'Asian/ethnic American' identity, age, political interest, partisan strength, and religious attendance increase the turnout rate" (91). This research agrees with Ecklund and Park, except for the data on age. Huang's general findings align with other factors already discussed, such as a correlation between political participation and residential stability that Lor (2009) found among those who owned their own homes in St. Paul. Hein (2006) and Doherty (2007) discuss the often difficult naturalization process for immigrants that negatively affects their ability to participate politically.

Reasons for Hmong Engagement

Hmong place high value on education and are thus motivated to be involved in educational opportunities for their children, from volunteering in the schools to successfully attaining seats on local school boards (Doherty 2007, Vang 2010). They have actively pursued the inclusion of Hmong history in public school curricula and Hmong studies courses at the college level (Xiong 2013). In Hein's study of collective action in the Hmong community of Minneapolis-St. Paul, he found the most popular goal of their civic engagement projects was better education, followed by social services (2014).

One powerful example of such engagement was the reaction of the Hmong to the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), or federal welfare law, passed by Congress in 1996. PRWORA “made non-U.S. citizens ineligible for some federal social welfare programs during the first five years in the United States and permanently excluded them from others. Previously, these programs had been open to all legal residents of the United States even if they had not yet naturalized” (Hein 2006, 209). Hein further describes the reaction of Hmong men in Milwaukee, Wisconsin who mobilized around this issue, becoming part of a collective action frame that was able to eventually obtain exemptions from benefit ineligibilities produced under PRWORA. Another example of the community coming together in successful collective action was seen with the push to provide Hmong veterans with English language accommodations in order to expedite the naturalization process (Xiong 2013).

Their experience of racism or injustice against their community has served as another mobilizing issue for Hmong Americans. As an ethnic minority the community’s unified reaction has been visible when responding to attacks or injustice in the media. Vang gives the examples of the DJ who made disparaging remarks about Hmong culture on air during a popular radio show in 1998 and the much publicized killing of six white hunters by Hmong American Chai Soua Vang in northern Wisconsin in 2004. While the latter incident was indeed horrific, the backlash that resulted was directed at the entire Hmong community instead of acknowledging the perpetrator as an individual. Hmong held news conferences and issued press releases to stand against hate and racial intolerance based on the actions of one person (Vang 2010). The community was united once again in grief in 2007 when Hmong hunter Cha Vang was shot and killed by a white man, again in Wisconsin. They urged that the shooter be charged with a hate crime and their activism in this case could be seen to affect the outcome of his trial, which resulted in a 69-year prison sentence (Vang 2010).

While the themes that have been highlighted so far and the reasons given for Hmong American civic and political activism have focused on domestic issues, the community is also mobilized frequently in support of homeland political interests, such as persecution of Hmong in Laos and desecration of Hmong graves in Thailand (Hein 2014, Xiong 2013). Vang (2011) makes a case for studying Hmong political engagement from a position that situates such behavior in political concerns for and ties to the homeland, rather than something that is purely an American-style political practice, rooted in local and U.S. national policies and issues. He posits that interest in transnational issues has led to more local interest and participation from within the Hmong American community. With the death of Hmong leader Vang Pao in 2011, international activism has fallen, possibly indicating the impact of such a leader on the community (Hein 2014, Vang and Hein 2015).

Summary

The literature has provided a picture of Hmong Americans as politically and civically engaged at higher rates than their SES would predict and at higher rates than surrounding ethnic minorities and immigrant groups in cities where they reside in larger numbers, such as in St. Paul and Fresno. While gender does not correlate with political engagement, a number of Hmong American women have been involved in several levels of government, as well as in community leadership roles. Some scholars have gone so far as to say that the Hmong may have a cultural affinity for government and political participation. The community places a high value on

education and views service in government office as a position of honor, thus encouraging their children to be involved in politics.

They still experience barriers to political and civic engagement, such as economic hardship and language difficulties in some sectors of the population, but several scholars note how rapidly candidates have emerged from within the Hmong American community, in certain Upper Midwest cities in particular. They have shown steady gains in educational attainment and SES since they began arriving in the U.S. This makes them a group to watch as such positive effects could impact their desire and ability to be consistently active and powerful partners in the betterment of society, and not just for their own ends. The younger generation, directly benefitting from their parents' and grandparents' value of education, is moving forward with fewer impediments than the earlier immigrant generation who faced challenges in language, acculturation, and naturalization. Unfortunately, the active participation seen in other Hmong populations has not emerged at the same rate in the Milwaukee area. The next chapter explores perspectives about Hmong life in this area to unpack some of the reasons for this limited civic engagement.

Chapter 4

Perspectives on Hmong Life in the Milwaukee Area

Hmong Americans in this study offered a wide range of opinions about life in the Milwaukee area. Many factors influence their perspectives about the quality of life here, but a clear distinction can be seen between those who grew up here, or have spent a significant number of years in this area, and those who moved here from other cities/states. It is true that no Hmong American has sought elected office, but a few have been appointed to serve on various commissions and committees. Some have mobilized around various issues that affect members of their community and others have met with elected officials who reached out to them. As mentioned above, civic engagement has been limited. However, it is helpful to provide a brief history of local activism.

Hmong Activism at the Local Level

Mobilizing to obtain resources for their ethnic community has been a core practice of the immigrant generation (Vang 2010). As discussed earlier, they formed nonprofit organizations and churches to support members of their community. Founders have typically responded to issues and gaps in services that they identified. In the mid-1990s, several individuals began to organize the community. As Zongcheng Moua explained:

In August 1997, Thai Her called a meeting to brainstorm about how to get our community to be more engaged. I may have missed a few others but besides Thai and I, participants included Charles Vang, Chimsiab Yang and Kao Lo. We formed the United Hmong Coalition (UHC). Others who joined later were Lang Xiong, Thai (Charles) Vang, Amoun Vang, Douglas Vue, Wang Fue Yang, Bee Vang, Her Lee, and Moualee Thao. The mission of UHC was to advocate for Hmong American citizens to actively be involved in the political process and issues that affect our lives. Our goals were to increase Hmong American citizens' 1) understanding of civic responsibilities and involvement in different political processes, 2) involvement in community forums and issues that affect our lives, 3) representation in both public and private sectors to serve the needs of [the] Hmong American community, and 4) unity to stand up for our rights, justice, and freedom for all. (Zongcheng Moua)

The coalition had grand goals and its members worked hard to build collective power, but it was not able to sustain the energy present at its inception. Some of the members, however, continued to gather for various efforts. They mobilized community members to be involved in local and state elections. The most notable was their involvement in former governor Jim Doyle's campaign. In 2002, they organized meetings and encouraged people to be involved. Doyle's election as governor of Wisconsin resulted in increased support for issues affecting Hmong Americans in Milwaukee and in other parts of the state. In 2004, their advocacy with friends and colleagues led the State Assembly to approve a \$2.5 million capital funding toward the building of a Hmong cultural center. The other half of the required funding would have to be raised by community members. Initially, the idea was to locate the center in Milwaukee since it had the largest Hmong population in the state, but once the state made the funding commitment, disagreements emerged about where to build it. A series of public meetings led to the decision to build it in Madison (Quorum Architects Inc. and Chamness Consulting, Inc., 2005). This tension along with the inability of community leaders to raise the matching \$2.5 million resulted in failure to build the proposed center.

Advocacy efforts have also been carried out by staff at the Hmong American Women’s Association to strengthen families and address gender inequality. They have continuously worked to support victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. HAWA leaders have collaborated with the Women’s Fund of Greater Milwaukee to bring about social change. Other ways in which Hmong in Milwaukee have sporadically mobilized include protest against perceived injustices against members of their community. Following the arrest of General Vang Pao in 2007, Hmong community leaders in Milwaukee organized and participated in rallies in Madison for his release. In 2008, Koua Moua was arrested for drunk driving and was subsequently beaten by a police officer. Leaders from Hmong American Friendship Association and Shee Yee Community organized rallies to protest police brutality. In March 2016, Phia Vue and Mai Kao Xiong were murdered in their home. Community members organized a vigil and called for justice to be served.



Why Milwaukee?

Why has the Hmong population continue to grow despite the inability to sustain efforts to build a stronger community? Why have residents chosen to live in this area? The most common responses from interviewees and storytelling circle participants were family, jobs, and education opportunities. The vast majority moved to the area because they wanted to be near their extended families. Others moved here for job and education opportunities, especially from smaller Wisconsin cities. Most of the high school and college students interviewed were born in Milwaukee, or came to Milwaukee for school. Some representative quotes included:

My uncle Chimsiab Yang had come to Milwaukee in the early 1980s. We had other relatives in Milwaukee so that is why we came here. We just followed him. (Lee La Yang, Mail Carrier)

I was born in Milwaukee. I have a lot of relatives here. What I like most about living in Milwaukee is that on weekends we have shaman or soul calling ceremonies (ua neeb/hu plig). Lots of food and fun with family, especially going to kill a cow for these ceremonies. (Nou Thao, Student at Menomonee Falls High School)

My aunt and uncle were here in Milwaukee so that’s how we ended up here. We came straight from Wat Tham Krabok [in Thailand] and we’ve been here since 2005. (Sherry Her, Assembly Worker)

My family is here. There are good educational and job opportunities so I never thought about moving. (Lojeng Xiong, Senior SAN Engineer with ProHealth Care)

The only thing keeping me here is extended family. I’m from Merced. Milwaukee has never felt like home. I also lived in Minnesota for seven years before moving here. If I had a choice, I would move to either California or Minnesota. (Jou Xiong, Second Grade Teacher with MPS)

I was raised here. I lived in Minnesota for a while and then moved back to Milwaukee. Milwaukee is home to me even though there’s not much established

“They all agreed that Milwaukee would be their destination where all the relatives would reunite and grow their Yang families.”

here for Hmong people. I'm not involved in anything in the community, just focusing on my family. But, if it were not for my extended family, I wouldn't have come back. (Tou Vang Xiong, Tech Account Manager with Infoblox)

My family came to the United States as refugees after living in a Thai refugee camp for five years after the Vietnam War. We resettled in Orange County, California in 1981. I was born an American citizen in Orange County. I don't have memories when we lived in California. When I was three years old, my family moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to reunite with my father's relatives. My father's relatives resettled in Memphis, Tennessee and not California. The elders wanted to be together again like how they lived [with] each other in a village back in mountain[s] of Laos before the Vietnam War. They all agreed that Milwaukee would be their destination where all the relatives would reunite and grow their Yang families. I grew up living in Milwaukee's inner city on the south side. I have lived in Milwaukee for 29 years and never moved out of Milwaukee. (Maychee Yang, Refugee Programs Coordinator with Wisconsin's Department of Children and Families)

It's home to me and there are many opportunities. There was a stronger sense of community when I was growing up. I attended dance class and performed. That sense of community has dissipated though. (Maly Xiong, Loan Administrator with BMO Harris)

I was born in Providence, RI. My family moved to Sheboygan and I'm here in Milwaukee to attend college. (Phoua Kue, Student at Alverno College)

In the early 1980s, there was a mass movement of Hmong to Milwaukee because [of] education, welfare, and jobs. It has manageable living expenses. It's cheaper than some other large cities so economically, it is a place in which Hmong can survive. But because of segregation, it's difficult for us. Factory jobs are not as hard but professional jobs are few. (Tsuker Yang, Pastor)

Is the Milwaukee area welcoming for Hmong people?

A recurring theme across age groups is that participants' close friends tend to be other Hmong people, in particular their relatives. While many talked about having non-Hmong acquaintances, very few said that they had close friends who were not Hmong. The most common reason many pointed out was that it is easier to relate to other Hmong people. For elders language barrier is the reason for having no non-Hmong friends. "It's hard to be friends with people if you can't communicate with each other" explained elder Wang Xiong Her (*Vaam Xyooj Hawj*, cultural leader). Some vehemently argued that Milwaukee is not a welcoming environment for Hmong people while others indicated that it was. Still others highlighted that the area is generally not welcoming to any newcomers, not just Hmong.

For those who felt that Milwaukee was a welcoming environment, they identified a variety of reasons reflecting the factors that influenced their settlement in this area. As illustrated by the following statements, the ability to find jobs and being able to avoid conflicts contributed to why some felt welcomed.

It feels welcoming even though there are a lot of horrible stories of harassment experienced by Hmong people. Lots of safety concerns for families, but Hmong do live in groups. We know which areas to avoid. (Mai Lao Thao, Family Coordinator/HS Academic Coach at Hmong American Peace Academy)

It's a good environment for our people because there are jobs and it's a bigger community so we have some resources. (Cher Chee Moua, clan leader)

Yes, no one bothers me when I take walks. (You Her, Stay at home mother)

"It's easy to find jobs even with only little understanding of English."

I haven't had any problems with anyone. (Nalee Her, Stay at home mother)

It's easy to find jobs even with only little understanding of English. (Khousa Her, Retired from Assembly Work)

I would say that it is probably 70% more welcoming than it was ten years ago because of the humbleness and the respectful nature of the people and their culture. And their ability to blend in and not try to be different. (Joe Campbell, Vietnam Veteran, Retired Businessman)

Maybe not in the early days when we first came here. But yes, for today. I think there is greater tolerance and acceptance of Hmong people, but we don't put ourselves out there as a community. We don't have a voice! (Pahoua Xiong, Public Health Associate/Marketing Manager at Greenfield Health Department)

In Milwaukee they don't treat people like in [a] small town. There's less discrimination. I mean, in a small town it's very friendly but they always look down on you as though you are inferior. In the big city, good and bad people are mixed. A lot of statistics show that Asian people are smart so they have a little respect. When I came to Milwaukee in 1989, I saw that it was the perfect place to raise my family. There are numerous universities with programs from bachelor or PhD and plenty of job opportunities. (Dr. Douglas Vue)

“I don't know if it is welcoming but we seem to pose less of a threat.”

It is important, however, to note the difference between how the larger community and Hmong residents in this area receive newcomers. The following individuals felt that Hmong community members helped to ease the transition for other Hmong.

Hmong community is welcoming to new Hmong people moving here. (Zongsae Vang, clan leader and Community Organizer/Elderly Specialist at Hmong American Friendship Association)

Hmong people welcome other Hmong people. For example, I have cousins who moved here from California. They stayed with us until they could help themselves. (Yee Yang, Student at Riverside University High School)

I live in Greendale. I'm not from Milwaukee. I think the Hmong community here is welcoming to outsiders, especially being a teacher. (Sam Lee, Middle and HS Science Teacher at Hmong American Peace Academy)

Others had reservations and they identified many reasons why they found the Milwaukee area a difficult environment. Representative comments consist of the following:

It's mostly welcoming. We used to live on the south side but moved to the north side around Galena and Cherry St. We used to have our windows broken 4-5 times a month. Racial slurs were common everyday experiences. The people didn't respect elders at all. It's still challenging, but now there are more homeowners so it's better. (Houa Xiong, First Grade Teacher at Hmong American Peace Academy)

Milwaukee is a welcoming city but resources are a very big challenge. Many Hmong yearn to be with other Hmong so they move here, but many just seek help from family and friends. (William Xiong, Service Technician with Central Office Systems)

Mainstream leaders know we are here but they don't respect us because we are not strong. We have no strong organization. When we are invited to participate, it's mostly tokenism. It's only so that they can claim there's diversity. Milwaukee is very conservative. It does not like minorities. With education and awareness, it's becoming a bit welcoming, but it's not intentional. For example, there are no jobs for our people at the county and city level. (Nengmay Vang)

Yes and no. Yes, because it accepts immigrants and refugees to this area. No, because we are used as low wage workers. Support individuals, but we are not empowered as a group. (Bobby Vang, Pastor of Hmong First Baptist Church)

I don't know if it is welcoming but we seem to pose less of a threat. They like us as co-workers. They like us as neighbors because we keep to ourselves and we don't bother anyone. We're not disruptive but we still are not valuable to others. (Pangying Sayaovong, Guidance Counselor with Riverside University High School)

For the majority of storytelling circle participants and key informants, this area is not welcoming for many reasons. Their responses are categorized as follows:

Racial Prejudice

Every year we get a caller who asks if the Hmong farmers are using their poop to fertilize. When we first moved to the farm some were angry we had Hmong farming there. One Vietnam vet was angry that there were Hmong here, even though the Hmong helped the U.S. So there are misconceptions. (Stephen Petro, COO and Farm Director with Fondy Food Center)

“Every year we get a caller who asks if the Hmong farmers are using their poop to fertilize.”

I'm more afraid of white people than African Americans. I grew up in the ghetto where my family still lives. We can be noisy but the neighbors don't care. When they are noisy, we don't care either. I feel more comfortable in the ghetto. I have cousins who live in the suburbs and the people there don't like them. (Lysa Chang, Student at Alverno College)

For me, Milwaukee is a very segregated city. Groups are isolated from each other. Very diverse but segregated. Many whites work in Milwaukee but they do not invest in Milwaukee. Groups stay within their groups. Very little interracial interaction. Leaders are white and few reach out to us or welcome us. Discrimination and racism are still common. (Der Vang, Student Services Specialist at MATC)

Milwaukee is a segregated city. Whites and Blacks have historically had issues. We are not welcomed. We are not welcomed by African Americans either and that's because Asians are generally seen as more successful, so there is fear of us taking over their resources. Whites are politically savvy. On the surface, they will be nice and supportive but deep inside, they don't want to invest in a diverse Milwaukee. (Maly Yang, Bilingual Citywide School Social Worker at MPS)

Some black people I go to school with will be interested and ask questions about Hmong culture, about our ethnic group, but others still call us “ching chong.” (Soua Lor, Student at Riverside University High School)

Milwaukee is a large city that's diverse so people are kind of used to seeing people of different backgrounds. But, I have eight siblings so wherever we go, people would look at us negatively. For example, when we went to shop at Woodman's [in the suburbs], other shoppers and the people who work there would watch us closely. There are still a lot of ignorant people who call us Chinese. Sure, some people are interested and take time to ask who we are but there's a lot of ignorance. (Mychoua Vang, Sexual Assault Victim Advocate/Youth Coordinator at Hmong American Friendship Association)

Milwaukee is a big city so people don't greet each other. I live in West Allis where it's mostly White and some Latinos. It's actually not a welcoming area either. Sometimes I think a little smile would go a long way. (Phoua Kue)

My family moved to West Allis and we were the only Asian family in an all-White neighborhood. We experienced so many problems. Our house was egged many times. The old ladies across the street never greeted us. Neighbors called the police to our house for no reason. One time there was a burglary nearby and the police just stopped by our house. There were lots of complaints made about us. The high school was also not a welcoming place. White students complained about why they needed to learn about multicultural topics. (Kathy Lee, Student at Alverno College)

My parents were falsely accused of shoplifting and humiliated by the store employees in front of many bystanders. I was so infuriated; I filed a complaint through the company's grievance process. The company addressed my letter professionally and promptly. I have also experienced racism/discrimination from ignorant people in the community one too many times. I usually ignore people that are not worth my time or feelings. (Maychee Yang)

Hmong are all lumped together as Chinese. Racial bigotry is prevalent. One time I was in the elevator at MATC. An African American man was in there with me and he called me "ching chong." Another time a white man screamed chink at me from his car. It happened a lot 20 years ago and you would think that we have surpassed this kind of racism! (Faiv Neng Her, Pastor of Hmong Hope Lutheran Church)

Few professional jobs are available for Hmong. That is because of hiring practices. Even if people have education and training, most decisions are made internally where people refer people they know. This makes it hard for outsiders to have a fair chance. (Faiv Neng Her)

It took a long time for me to feel comfortable. I have some cousins but no other close family members nearby. Safety is a big concern so I live in Brown Deer. (Kao Hlee Lee, K4 Teacher at Hmong American Peace Academy)

"One time there was a burglary nearby and the police just stopped by our house."

"We mostly hang out with our family and relatives only."

"If you are not here with family, then you are not connected."

Intra-ethnic Animosity

I think Milwaukee is accepting and there are resources available but we have conflicts within ourselves. (Xee Moua, Foster Care Licensing Specialist)

Truthfully, I'm not fond of Milwaukee. I grew up in Fresno and there were so many more Hmong. There are fewer Hmong here and we're very isolated. Hmong don't support one another. I married and moved here so I'm staying here because of family obligations. (Tria Moua, Stay at Home Mom/Customer Service Representative with Swiss Calling)

It's definitely not welcoming. This is true of the Hmong community not welcoming outsiders as well as the larger Milwaukee community not being welcoming to Hmong people. The Hmong community here is living in a bubble and is not very aware of what is happening in the larger community. We mostly hang out with our family and relatives only. (May yer Thao, Executive Director of Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce)

If you are not here with family, then you are not connected. There are cliques. Small groups based on social relations so when you don't have family here, you're an outsider. (Annie Lee, Income Maintenance Specialist with State of Wisconsin)

There is no sense of togetherness among the Hmong in Milwaukee. We don't connect with one another. There is segregation within the community and a lot of competition. (Yi Moua, Mental Health Intake Coordinator)

"I am aware of which neighborhoods in Milwaukee I need to avoid."

Hmong Community Assets

Some variations exist between how Hmong participants view the Hmong community and what non-Hmong interviewees believe are Hmong strengths. When participants were asked to discuss what assets the Hmong community possessed, they identified personal traits and cultural values as key strengths. The two most common assets highlighted across interviews and storytelling circles are strong family ties and good work ethic. The following are some representative quotes:

“I think the Hmong community’s belief in education is the right strategy for the community.”

Non-Hmong Views

Family loyalty is very strong. Strong community ties, really valuing those relationships and making sure that you’re helping folks in that community, in your family ... (Stephen Petro)

The Hmong are very family oriented and very traditional. I remember from my hospital management days when elderly Hmong needed healthcare the hospital staff needed to be sensitive to their cultural needs as well as their physical ones. (George Hinton, CEO, Social Development Commission)

I think one of the strengths is strong families. They support each other. The grandparents take care of the little ones while the parents go out to work. From a financial standpoint, when the kids are 2-3, they don’t have to necessarily go to daycare and things like that. That saves money. New welfare rules mean new mothers have to get back to work quickly, etc. But family support and organizational support from the associations and the church is a definite plus. Most I know go to church. That is strong in their lives as well. They have a strong work ethic. (Will Allen, Farmer Founder and CEO of Growing Power, Inc.)

They are hardworking, patriotic, no association with crime, good economic investment. (Chris Abele, Milwaukee County Executive)

They have a high work ethic, strong family values, lots of respect for their elders. They have retained their culture in many ways. They remain very respectful and focused on doing well in education and in life. (Joe Campbell)

Hmong families are committed to education for their children. I gave my State of the City address this year at Hmong American Peace Academy because I wanted people to know how great this place is. I think the Hmong community’s belief in education is the right strategy for the community. (Tom Barrett, Mayor of Milwaukee)

The Hmong pursue education and personal development. They work hard to ensure that the next generation will have it better. They work to keep their history and culture alive. (Jim Duff, Milwaukee County Veterans Services Director)

“Once people get to know us, they generally like us because we are hard workers.”

Hmong Views

Once people get to know us, they generally like us because we are hard workers. I have placed hundreds of people in jobs and companies often request more Hmong workers after they hire a few. (Nengmay Vang)

A lot of untapped talents. Hardworking people. People now generally don’t want handouts. We provide for our family and we are generally good people. (Pangying Sayaovong)

Many Hmong are not participating in various programs because we are self-sufficient. I think most people are taking care of themselves and their families. It seems there are fewer resources, but that’s because many of us don’t need social services any more. That’s a good thing. (Za Thao Moua, *Zaam Thoj Muas*, clan leader)

Hmong in Milwaukee live in harmony. We may not be doing very well publicly, but we have few problems. We are homeowners even though we don't have much. We're generally self-sufficient. There are no bars and clubs for older Hmong like in St. Paul to cause family problems. (Maly Yang)

Perceptions of Hmong in the larger community

When asked how they thought Hmong were perceived in the larger community, study participants provided a full range of observations. Sample comments include the following:

Viewed Positively

The Hmong community in general is viewed positively. I heard from landlord members of KANDO that they are pleased to have Hmong tenants. I always hear positive things about Hmong. They don't come to the Block Watch meetings and I wish they would. I think they would have a positive contribution and would learn good things to help them. There was some fear in the early 2000s because of Hmong gangs, but this is not a problem AT ALL now. They are generally viewed positively... People recognize that the Hmong have strong families. They are very close-knit and known as strong people with strong internal support systems and hard working. (Liz Hammer, Community Development Specialist, Havenwoods)

They are very intelligent, fierce listeners. Love harmony. They really want to be a part of, not apart from. But they're not forceful. How many Hmong marches have you seen? None. (Joe Campbell)

Hmong have a relatively good reputation. When they know who we are, then we are thought of positively. We have many professionals and businesses, but we are mostly working class. (Bobby Vang)

They have such great infrastructure, family infrastructure, organization – they've been around for a long time, they've progressed very well. They were forced to come into this country, but the Hmong community is much more aggressive to going after that American life – their family structure helps them out and helps them to start businesses, etc. (Will Allen)

They have tight knit families. (John Chisolm, Milwaukee County District Attorney)

Indifferent/Negative Views

Other viewpoints highlighted how Hmong are overlooked and that they are not seen as important to be included. Or, if included, assumptions are made about their ethnic group that contradict their lived experiences. Some pointed out that Hmong have been viewed negatively by others, which resulted largely from their socioeconomic position in society and the fact that people in the larger community have limited knowledge about their ethnic group. Representative quotes include the following:

“Most people in Milwaukee don't know we have a Hmong community.”

I know they know that we exist, but I don't think they know our needs. We resettled quietly, so we are now forgotten. We are spread out all over the city so people can easily overlook us. There remains a lack of knowledge about our people. (Maly Yang)

They know Hmong kids are in the school system, and they still think that we need translation. But 80% don't because we've been here so long. One of the assumptions is that Hmong kids behave well and study hard. When in groups, they do exhibit bad behaviors and that affects their grades. In a way the larger community either have no opinion about us or if they do, it is generally positive. The sad part though is that people view us as not adding any value. We just exist and bring nothing to the table. (Pangying Sayaovong)

I think Hmong people are visible and people know that we are here, but we're not invited to be at the table. We're usually an afterthought. The segregated culture here in Milwaukee has made Hmong people isolated... (May yer Thao)

I think they are not looked on as a threat. (Will Allen)

Most people in Milwaukee don't know we have a Hmong community. They are not aware of Hmong history or war involvement in service to the U.S. They don't know why they're here. Most people are "agnostic" in their opinion of the Hmong, neither positive nor negative. No associations with crime or other negative associations. (Chris Abele)

I would say that up until recently they were treated very negatively and were looked upon as the lowest class, especially the youth. The parents stayed clear of everything because they couldn't speak English. They had their own stores, etc. The kids went through harassment and thus began some of the Hmong gangs. What any ethnicity would do when criticized, etc. (Joe Campbell)

There's not a lot of understanding about the Hmong culture or their history. It's different in different parts of the city. Folks here see them differently than say from those up in Port Washington where the farm is located. (Stephen Petro)

I feel that mostly people are ignorant of who the Hmong are and why they are here. This is a general thing in Milwaukee, that most people don't know much about those outside of their own culture. I do not know of any specific negative associations with the Hmong here. People do not realize that they sacrificed their lives, their families, and their homes to serve the efforts of the U.S., and that they were then not openly recognized for their service by the U.S. for a number of years... I am very aware of their story and... this is very frustrating for me... U.S. veterans in general, and Vietnam veterans in particular, feel a strong connection to the Hmong freedom fighters and to their community. (Jim Duff)

Because the community is so small I guess they do not experience as much of the institutionalized racism as, say, the African American community. They can benefit from Asian stereotypes on one hand, yet it can work against them as well. This kind of stereotyping can cut both ways. The Hmong are still relatively new to the Milwaukee community, compared with most other ethnic groups. Mostly people just are not aware of who the Hmong are. (George Hinton)

Changing Opinions of Hmong People

A number of participants discussed how attitudes toward Hmong people have changed over time in both directions. For example, John Chisholm stated, "The Hmong community has made a lot of sacrifices and they are poised to integrate into American society. Gang issues have diminished greatly" (Milwaukee County District Attorney). Will Allen shared the following thoughtful reflection:

I have worked with the Hmong for over 20 years. I used to manage the Fondy market 25 years ago and one of the skill sets that they had was agriculture. Back then the Fondy market was comprised of mostly Caucasian farmers... Back then a lot of the farmers didn't want the Hmong farmers to come into the market. So I helped them get into the market and build relationships... We did go through struggles getting them into Fondy market, but now mostly 90% there are Hmong. Great growers and knew how to prep food for the markets. There was a lot of racism back in those days. White people thought they were buying food and reselling it, not growing it themselves, which wasn't true. They are just good growers.... I think there've been some improvements in terms of how they're viewed. Of course they have been very passionate about improving their lives. As immigrants coming into this country, as many do, they've been very successful in educating their children and so forth.

“They can benefit from Asian stereotypes on one hand, yet it can work against them as well.”

Toby Yang, guidance counselor with MPS, holds a contrary perspective, one shared by a number of other study participants.

Hmong have generally had a good reputation but I think it's reducing the longer we live in this country. Some are not willing to learn and integrate. Others take actions without thoughtful consideration, especially criminal activities. I fear that our reputation will be even worse in the future if we don't make changes now.

Most pressing issues in the Hmong community

When asked to identify the most pressing issues for Hmong in the Milwaukee area, interviewees and storytelling circle participants highlighted many. Not surprisingly, the vast majority did not have difficulties coming up with issues. They talked about what they saw as problems at the individual, Hmong community, and societal level. Interestingly, they were critical of intra-ethnic practices. Their responses are synthesized into the following categories from most frequently to least mentioned.

“We are segregated just like the rest of Milwaukee. No Hmong leader to help us advance together.”

Incohesive Hmong Community

The overwhelming majority of Hmong participants pointed out that no sense of community currently exists. From the high school participants to elder cultural leaders, they highlighted barriers that they believe prevent the development of a cohesive Hmong community.

Clan/small groups

Clan segregation is a big problem. Even churches are clan-based. People only promote those in their clan. (Pangying Sayaovong)

We lack leadership. The 18 clan leaders are not firmly elected. They are volunteers who mostly deal with domestic/clan issues. (Tsuker Yang)

Hmong people don't communicate much with each other. There is not enough unity because of people's pride or ego. People here are not collaborative. There's a lot of segregation here. We are segregated just like the rest of Milwaukee. No Hmong leader to help us advance together. There are only small groups and people only care about personal gains. (Lee La Yang)

People here are active in their small groups. The sense of belonging is within those groups. People are taking care of their groups only (*ua paab ua pawg*). (Jou Xiong)

There are cliques and people just stay in small groups. (Mai Ying Yang, Student at Alverno College)

In the past Hmong organizations have tried to mobilize our community to be involved. When people came together, there were many different opinions so there were disagreements. Because of the lack of trust, we did not make any progress. That's why nowadays I don't get involved with anything anymore. I think that the discussions are just debates and there are no solutions. We have some organizations already and then there's the 18 Clan Council. How many groups do we need to create? People are just not willing to participate. If one group does something, others don't want to be involved. I don't know why but my assumption is that it is because people are now equally educated. (Wang Xiong Her, cultural leader)

“We're like live crabs in a bucket. Instead of helping the ones who are near the top to climb over, we drag them back down with us.”

Hmong people only support those who are related to them. They are biased. (*Xaiv ntse xaiv muag*). (Xai Tong Moua, *Xaiv Tooj Muas*, cultural leader)

There's misrepresentation of the Hmong community. Many people claim to be representing Hmong, but they don't really represent more than the few people they are working with. (Za Thao Moua, *Zaam Thoj Muas*, clan leader)

Our community lacks a united organization to lead us. It seems that most of what is done in the community is blindly done. (*Txhua yaam peb ua zoo le xua dlub xwb*). (Xia Fong Thao, *Txhaj Foom Thoj*, cultural leader)

Too much bickering about positions. No collective actions for the benefit of the community. (Xai Lee Vang, *Xaiv Lis Vaj*, cultural leader)

We have always developed one project after another. There is nothing systematic to mobilize our community. (Zongsae Vang)

Jealousy/Ego/Pride

Jealousy is a big problem with Hmong people. We are not supportive of one another. We're like live crabs in a bucket. Instead of helping the ones who are near the top to climb over, we drag them back down with us. That's why many individuals who make it step away from the Hmong community. (See Lor, Accountant/Entrepreneur)

There is so much jealousy in our community. People are always putting others down. We have so [many] events and people who have PhDs and the increasing number of professionals. If we can build each other up instead of being jealous (*xam khib*), then I think things will get better. (Phoua Kue)

Hmong prejudice against other Hmong people is a big problem. (Yee Yang)

People think they are better than other people. For example, my cousins who live in the suburbs think that they are better than those of us who live in the ghetto. Putting each other down is a problem. When there's a tragedy, people do worry and try to come together. Why does it have to take tragedies for people to come together? Most Hmong people are close-minded. Women, especially, don't speak their minds even when they have opinions and ideas. They just defer to the men. (Lysa Chang)

Why does it have to take tragedies for people to come together?

Religious/Linguistic Prejudice

We are becoming an increasingly divided community along religious lines compounded by clan and family affiliations. People no longer participate in the same events. (Nengmay Vang)

There are too [many] family feuds, especially when it comes to religious differences. Family divisions are made based on religion. (Kathy Lee)

There is still prejudice within Hmong people ourselves. It's especially true between Hmong Leng (Green Hmong) and Hmong Der (White Hmong). (Lue Lor, Student at Riverside University High School)

Hmong people are pretty bad toward each other. I saw a post on Facebook a while ago with a shaman performing a ceremony. One of the comments underneath it was, "making deals with the devil." Clearly, it must have been from a Hmong person who has converted to Christianity. Why would you ridicule a Hmong religious practice like that? (Nou Thao)

Lack of Representation/Acknowledgment in the Larger Community

The second most common theme of concern involves Hmong being invisible to those in power, mistreatment by those in the larger community, and the lack of leaders who will advocate on their behalf. Representative comments include the following:

We're a small group... Leaders don't fear us so they don't have to address our issues. (Pangying Sayaovong)

Whenever there are crimes against Hmong people, we are not strong at all. We have no voice. (Green Lue Her, Machine Operator)

There is a lot of disrespect from mainstream community toward our people. I know of many cases where Hmong who speak broken English are falsely blamed for things that were not their fault because they couldn't express themselves. For example, police officers at car accidents not even listening to their side of the story and just went with what the other people said. Mainstream leaders also don't show much respect toward us. Because of our smaller stature, mainstream leaders look down on us. They don't take us seriously. People in general are also biased toward us. (Faiv Neng Her)

We are still asked "Where are you from?" For our children who are born in this country, they don't know how to answer that. (Tsuker Yang)

Racial injustice. We face a lot of racism. Like the Dylan Yang case and the Vue couple that were murdered by a white man. (Mai Chue Yang, Student at Riverside University High School)

We don't have representation in many mainstream institutions that serve our community. For example, since Neng Thong is no longer there, no one has been hired so at MPS central office, no Hmong individual is there to serve our families. We are not represented in the larger community, but is it their fault or ours. (Zongsae Vang)

We don't have someone to advocate for us like in Minnesota. The Hmong people there have Hmong politicians to represent them. (Lee La Yang)

The Hmong community is still under-represented even today. I see Hmong people on television only when the media is portraying something negative that a Hmong person has done. I don't see [many] positive things about Hmong people in the community. (MayChee Yang)

"I see Hmong people on television only when the media is portraying something negative that a Hmong person has done."

Intergenerational Challenges

The many critiques about lack of cooperation seem to stem from intergenerational differences. Divergent interests and priorities get in the way of community members

collaborating across generations. Members of the younger generation are critical of the older generation's approaches to addressing issues and concerns at the same time that the older generation thinks young people lack respect for each other and for elders. Others like Maly Xiong call for the young generation to continue what their elders have begun. She stated, "The older generation's ideas are fading. It has done its job. My father's generation brought people together. The younger generation needs to build on that. We need to figure out a way to build a sense of community." The following comments illustrate the intergenerational tensions facing Hmong Americans:

I see that Hmong elders don't engage with young people. (Green Lue Her)

Generation gap. Parents and children have different visions. (Mai Ying Yang)

Young people are still concerned only about survival. Elder leaders are no more. Where are the new leaders? (Amy Xiong, Occupational Therapist)

Young people are losing our language and culture. Some people lack respect for elders. At the same time, some Hmong parents are stuck in their ways. (Houa Xiong)

In the past when we lived in Laos, whatever elders said would just be accepted and not questioned. For me, I'm not concerned about whether the ideas are from sons or daughters. As long as the person has good ideas and can articulate them well, then we should accept them. Just because our elders have always done things a certain way does not mean that we should continue them. Also, I'm not trying to criticize our community organizations because they do follow rules and regulations, but in the future, I would like to see our educated young people review rules and regulations so that we can avoid future problems that prevent our community from becoming more prosperous... But I also see that those who are educated are not willing to accept elders' ideas. (Xai Tong Moua)

Many Hmong parents are so critical and put a lot of pressure on their children. They always compare us with themselves or others, like when they were our age, they had already done this or that. They are very prejudiced also, like telling young Hmong not to date black people or other people who are not Hmong. The racism goes both ways. Sometimes it's not even non-Hmong people they don't want you to date. They are even against other Hmong people because they don't like someone from that clan. (Soua Lor)

It's hard to motivate young people to be involved in committees. Elders and young people are not cooperating. (Vang Pao Xiong, clan leader)

Young, educated professionals are not interested in being involved because they don't want to just talk. (Toby Yang)

There is a decline in motivation, love of learning among children. It's the norm to not stand out. They don't fit the Asian stereotype. The younger generation is not motivated. They seem to be satisfied with mediocre jobs and salaries or leeching off of parents. (Pangying Sayaovong)

We are at a loss on how to motivate our young people to be involved. Knowledge and information may be good, but Hmong just don't attend workshops any more. (Nengmay Vang)

“Young, educated professionals are not interested in being involved because they don't want to just talk.”

Lack of Focus on Greater Good

There is a sense across age groups that the lack of motivation for community involvement is because people are more interested in personal gain and less focused on taking actions for the greater good. Comments from participants who had been active in the past but no longer are reveal frustration and burnout from not seeing results.

People do things only because of financial incentives. Only self-interest and not altruistic. The main problem has been with those who are formally educated and not elders and those who are uneducated. Too much selfishness among the educated. (Wang Xiong Her)

People are too focused on themselves. There is a lack of willingness to sacrifice for other people. We lack any structure for organizing our community. (Sherry Her)

The educated Hmong people don't collaborate. They are just focusing on themselves. (Chai Pao Thao, *Nchaiv Pov Thoj*, clan leader)

Hmong in Milwaukee are not active. We are more into ourselves. We have more than 150 Hmong staff in MPS. We used to have a meeting every several months, but it went nowhere. People didn't see any progress. There was excitement and talk but no results. When people don't see change, they don't want to be involved anymore. (Pangying Sayaovong)

Drug and Alcohol Abuse.

Some participants indicated that Hmong Americans were not immune to the challenges of drug abuse that exist in the larger society. They worry about the impact of drug and alcohol abuse on youth and families. The following comments shed light on participants' outrage with alcohol abuse:

There is simply just too much alcohol at family/community gatherings. The small part that alcohol plays in cultural rituals is not the problem. It is the excessive drinking apart from the rituals that makes every function unpleasant for families and sometimes neighbors because of the noise and mess. (Sherry Her)

We drink too much alcohol at our community events that it has become very difficult for us to find places to rent. (Vang Pao Xiong)

Excessive alcohol use at some facilities has made some people not like us. When they first rent to us, they like our business, but after some functions and they see how uncontrollable we can become, they don't even want our business anymore. (Cha Tro Lo (*Tsav Tsauj Lauj*), Clan Leader)

Some leaders behave inappropriately when under the influence of alcohol. If a leader cannot control himself or herself in a public space, it will diminish his or her reputation. When people drink too much at clubs or entertainment events, their behavior affects the way people will look at them after the events. (Maly Yang)

Parenting/Family Problems

Many participants, in particular those who work with families regularly, worry about the plethora of challenges facing families. They feel that the problems have grown and few strategic efforts exist to improve the situation. They believe that major factors such as domestic violence,

international second marriages, and gambling contribute to the breakdown of family units. They share grave concerns about the status of the Hmong family in the following sample comments:

Family dysfunction seems to be the number one issue that leads to many other problems. Transnational second marriages increase divorce. Gambling also affects family lives. When parents have problems, it leaves little hope for kids and with too many barriers to overcome, children suffer. (Maly Yang)

Increased divorce is having a negative impact on our families. Divorce has caused more suffering on children than parents. I am concerned about the mixed messages some parents are sending to their children. This is especially true in families where the men practice polygamy. The children are taught at a very young age that it is acceptable to lie about their family. (Faiv Neng Her)

Some of us are professionals to help kids but there are those who don't have knowledge about how to support their children. (Mai Lao Thao)

Even young parents struggle to help their children. Many don't know how to establish relationships with their children. But, lack of structure doesn't mean they're bad parents. (Houa Xiong)

Parenting challenges. Some more focused on relatives and community events and not enough on their own children. (Sam Lee)

Health Challenges

In the health care area, participants identified both access to quality health care and beliefs about illness as major issues. Culturally relevant care remains a top priority for the immigrant generation but participants believe that viewpoints about health and illnesses affect the pursuit of health services. The following statements illustrate these dilemmas:

“It takes a lot to unpack the issues to get to the mental health challenges.”

A big issue is healthcare for the older generation as they are aging. It's hard to have a balance between the medical component, the cultural component, and the realities of the individual families. They are sort of caught between two worlds at times. (Stephen Petro)

Lack of preventive care so people are waiting until it's too late. For elders, language barrier is still an issue. Many children do not get regular checkups. (Kao Hlee Lee)

From pre-school to elders, there is so much work to be done in the health area. Increased chronic illnesses. Lack of education about prevention. (Mai Lao Thao)

Mental health. We don't want to talk about it, especially depression in children. Parents think that it's just a phase. (Sam Lee)

Mental health for young and old. Older people struggle with everyday issues that result in suicide or suicide attempts or divorce. Young people struggle so much too and it takes so much time to build trust and convince parents, teachers, and school officials that they have mental health issues. It takes a lot to unpack the issues to get to the mental health challenges. (Maly Yang)

Integration Issues/Poverty

In Wisconsin, eight percent of the population experience poverty, but 19 percent of the state's Hmong population live below the poverty line (*The State of the Hmong American Community, 2013, 26*).⁷ Table 5 shows the annual household income of asset inventory respondents. Since the number of household members was not gathered, it is not possible to determine how many experience poverty, but the annual income data below show that almost two-thirds of the respondents who answered this question earned less than \$55,000.

Table 5: Annual Household Income, N=156

Income Level	Number/Percentage
Under \$25,000	13 (8.34%)
\$25,000-\$34,999	34 (21.79%)
\$35,000-\$44,999	28 (17.95%)
\$45,000-\$54,999	24 (15.38%)
\$55,000-\$64,999	12 (7.69%)
\$65,000-\$74,999	13 (8.34%)
\$75,000 or higher	32 (20.51%)
Total	156 (100%)

Source: Author Tabulation

Study participants identified both internal and external factors that influence Hmong integration into the larger society. Representative comments include the following:

They often live in areas that are largely African American so some of the problems in those areas are things they must face as well, including gang activities, jobs, etc. People can easily assume you're stupid if you can't speak English, can't understand and be understood... Assimilation is a challenge. (George Hinton)

I hate to answer for them, but they are so strongly family and clan-structured yet not plugged in to what is already organized out there for their benefit, such as the Block Watch groups. Even among the youth, I don't think they are as aware of what is out there for them to deal with neighborhood problems, area crime, nuisances, bad tenants in the neighborhood. I am worried that because they don't know what to do about these issues, that they become isolated in their homes, afraid of these things happening on their block or in their neighborhood, not realizing there are abatement programs that are effective that they can call on to improve their street, their areas. (Liz Hammer)

I think today they face some of the same issues that everyone is facing – finding adequate good housing and communities. Having to deal with crime. If you live in an inner city community there are added fears and stress because many of them are embedded in communities, you know, they're not afraid, but they're stuck there because of economics. Everybody wants to live in a sustainable community. (Will Allen)

Some people feel powerless and just accept living in poverty. Some want to get out but it's hard. Just meeting basic needs is challenging for many families. (Mai Lao Thao)

We have no business and economic power. (Nengmay Vang)

Hmong Humility

In Western society, recognition is often given to those who can affectively promote themselves. Some participants were adamant that the humility demonstrated by Hmong community members results in others not noticing their skills and knowledge. Moreover, they are seen as not confident and capable. As Mai Lao Thao puts it, "Hmong are taught and conditioned to listen and not challenge their elders." The following comments best illustrates this dynamic:

One thing I've noticed is our farmers are very modest, to the point of being self-deprecating. Culturally in the U.S. people value folks who think highly of themselves. If you don't come to the table with that you can be overlooked. Not because you don't have the qualifications or ability to do the job, but because you

are overlooked. That value isn't wrong, but it can cause people to be overlooked for opportunities at times. I hear a lot from my farmers, "I'm dumb, I'm just a farmer ...". They are a lot more valuable than they seem to believe they are. This is just the farmers, but might not be the whole Hmong community...More of an issue with the older generation. The younger generation seems to be assimilating more with American culture. Still there, but not as prevalent among the younger people. (Stephen Petro)

We need to be more confident in ourselves that we can do things. Fear of failure is common. We need to be brave and proactive. (Kao Hlee Lee)

Crime and Safety

Similar to challenges with integration and poverty, many participants identify crime and safety as pressing issues. They present a variety of personal situations that demonstrate their frustration with how those who do not speak English are treated. Khoua Her's statement best summarized this dilemma, "When you don't know English, anyone can blame things on you for no reason." Chang Vang offered additional examples, "I was hit with snowballs twice by African American boys. Because I didn't know how to communicate with them, I couldn't say anything." Houa Xiong succinctly stated, "There's huge segregation even in the hood! You always have to be careful, especially after dark." Participants further discussed their experiences with law enforcement as follows:

"There's huge segregation even in the hood! You always have to be careful, especially after dark."

Our house was burglarized once. The person broke our lock and came inside the house very early in the morning. We didn't even hear the burglar. When we woke up, we discovered that most of my younger son's belongings were stolen. We called the police but it took them a long time to get here. (Pang Thao, Unemployed)

I was involved in a hit and run car accident. The person who hit me took off. I called the police and they didn't come for a very long time. It was very frustrating. (Nalee Her)

We know some areas in Milwaukee that we can't live. Car theft and all sorts of problems. The police [don't] come when it's just car theft. There's nothing you can do about it. People live in fear. (Tsuker Yang)

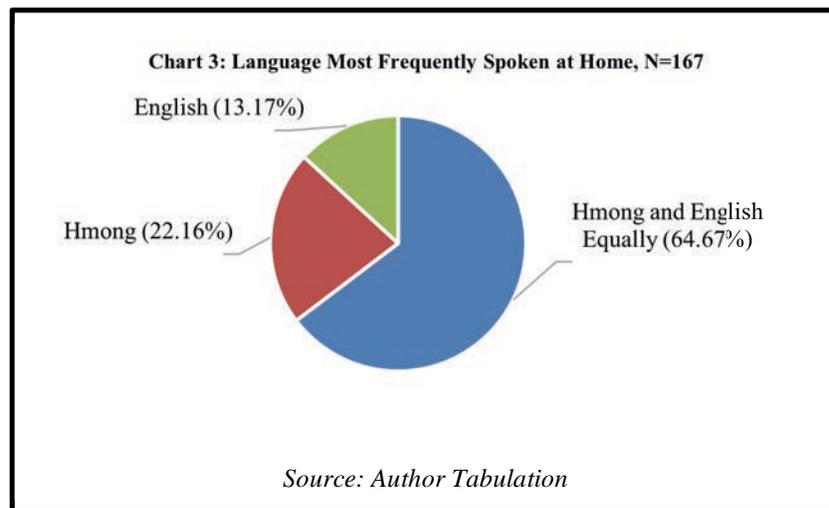
Gender Issues

Some interviewees and storytelling circle participants acknowledged that Hmong women are successful in different sectors in the mainstream community, but they raised concerns about persistent gender inequality within the ethnic group. They worry about how this impacts not only women, but the entire community. Xee Moua's statement best reflects this tension. She said, "Women are afraid to ask for help so they keep issues to themselves. They exhibit a happy face to the community even though they may be struggling." While discussing gender roles, Annie Lee vehemently stated, "Our Hmong men need some polishing. They need to lead, represent, and stand up for us." High school student, Yee Yang, offered the following observation:

We need to do something about gender inequality in our community. How we raise our children can impact them a lot. Like when we were younger, my mom had this idea that men didn't do any household work, just women. But now, she wants my brothers to help out and it's not working.

Hmong Culture and Traditions

Many participants across generations discussed in-depth the fear of losing Hmong culture and its traditions and the need to reevaluate Hmong cultural practices that conflict with today's lifestyles. The inability to speak Hmong language among the younger generation is seen as an integral aspect of loss of traditions. Riverside University high school student Soua Lor explained the phenomenon, "We are losing our traditions each day. Language, rituals. Some kids don't speak any Hmong at all." Many professionals admitted that their own children were not faring well when it came to Hmong language skills. Responses to our asset inventory question about the language most frequently spoken at home show that nearly two-thirds use Hmong and English equally, as illustrated in Chart 3.



In addition to the loss of Hmong language among the younger generation, some study participants highlighted challenges with funeral practices. The following statements by Faiv Neng Her and Tou Vang Xiong best describe the issues:

Funeral home owners and politicians don't like our Hmong traditions. Several funeral homes are closed to Hmong because we have hundreds of cars that are parked throughout the neighborhood for several days. (Faiv Neng Her)

Cultural practices are being lost but we need to evaluate what changes need to be made to our traditions. For example, it's difficult to find funeral locations. Funeral services have become a show and tell event. How important is it to have it 24/7 for three days? What can we adapt and what needs to be continued? These things need to be discussed. (Tou Vang Xiong)

Limited Outlet for Disseminating Community News

When interviewees and storytelling circle participants discuss pressing issues for Hmong in Milwaukee, they often compare them to populations in other large U.S. cities that are engaged and thriving. They acknowledge the existence of two Hmong radio stations in Milwaukee (Suab Hmoob and Hmong ABC Radio), but they easily point to gaps in outlets for sharing community news and information. Other cities with large Hmong populations have newspapers and television shows to inform community members. The lack of these media outlets result in

Hmong here being unaware of what others are doing, especially activities and events hosted by community organizations. Lojeng Xiong posed several questions about this situation, “What are Hmong organizations doing now? How can they inform us about what they’re doing? How do they get the message out to people so if there are things we want to participate in, we could?” Maly Xiong takes it one step further by stating that the issue goes both ways, “Community organizations are not reaching out and professionals are also not researching out.” Jou Xiong put it frankly that young Hmong are not in the loop about what is happening in the community. She said, “The elders actually know more about what’s happening because they talk to each other. They listen to the Hmong radio and get information out by word of mouth. Younger people are out of tune because we don’t talk to each other.”

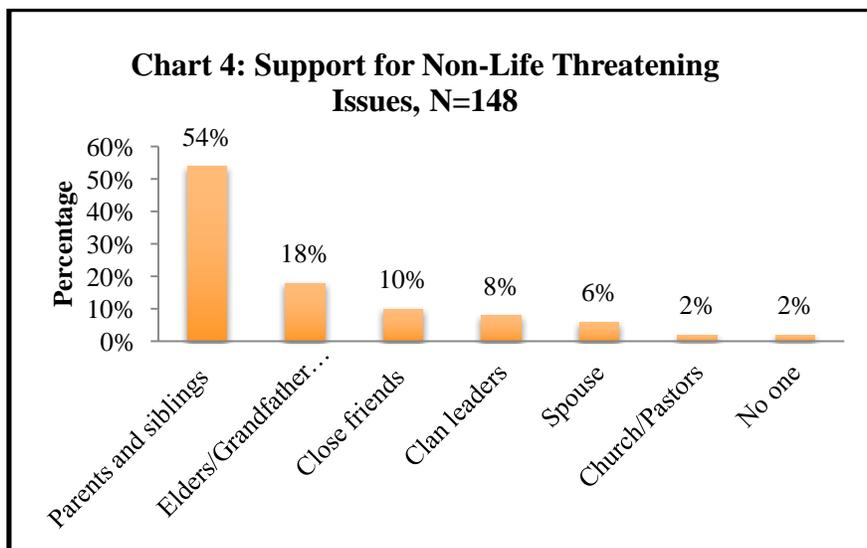
Chapter 5

Viewpoints and Experiences with Leadership

Because the overarching goal of THMCEP is to build the capacity of former refugees and their children to play a more active role in the larger community, this study asked Hmong storytelling circle participants to reflect on a number of leadership related questions. We did not define leader or leadership. Instead, broader questions were posted to generate themes and ideas about participants' viewpoints and experiences with leadership. For this topic, most storytelling circle participants were given questionnaires to complete individually regarding views on leadership. Thus, they provided written responses.⁸

Whom to Turn to When There Are Issues and Why

When asked whom they turn to for support when there are non-life threatening issues and why the specific source, participants overwhelmingly state that they seek help from family members. Parents and siblings are the most frequently mentioned. The primary reason is because there is trust and understanding. Married participants explain that they seek support from their spouse and if issues are not resolved, then they pursue assistance from elders or clan leaders. A few participants indicated that they usually try to figure things out by themselves because they either did not want to talk about personal issues with others or that they did not have close relationships with their immediate and extended family members. Not surprisingly, most young participants indicated that they also depend on close friends who understand what they are going through because they are at the same stage in life.



Source: Author's Tabulation

Who are Thought of as Leaders and Why

Storytelling circle participants were asked to share who came to mind when they thought about leaders and why. Like the previous question about issues, leader was not defined. The most

common responses include mainstream elected officials followed by immediate family members, clan leaders, General Vang Pao, Hmong from elsewhere, and nonprofit leaders.

Mainstream Elected Officials and Historical Figures

Even though most people mention family members at the personal level, many immediately follow their initial responses by mentioning mainstream elected officials and non-elected figures that inspire them. President Obama is the most frequently mentioned. Some representative comments are:

I think of President Obama and national community organizers. The President of the United States is the epitome of leadership. Community organizers are under-rated for the level of work they do and how their work positively impacts the community. I think that community organizers are true leaders even though they don't get as much credit as they should. (MayChee Yang)

Besides my father, the only leader whose footsteps I would be proud to take after are American history leaders, Lincoln and King. And, Mother Teresa. (See Lor)

I think of people like Maya Angelou or Hillary Clinton. They are passionate about their communities and at their core want to help people become better versions of themselves. (Chia Xiong, Banker at US Bank)

The governor and the president. (Selai Yang, Student at MATC)

I think of Obama, King Bhumibol, Martin Luther King, people who work for the greater good of people to maintain peace for the majority despite their race & personal preferences. (Phoua Kue)

When I think of leaders, I think of people like President Obama and Gandhi. (Pa Der Ly)

Of course, the mayor of Milwaukee. (Kong Kou Yang)

It depends on what issue. If it's larger community issues, then my alderman and the mayor. (Cher Chee Moua)

I think of President Obama because he is diplomatic and tactful. He can convey messages on controversial topics and still bring people together without pulling the community apart. (31-Year-Old Female)

On a grander scale, I've always admired Dr. King, his approach of moving his community and the nation towards progress through peace. Truly inspiring! (Pahoua Xiong)

Phil Jackson leader/coach for many years in NBA. Leading not only the players but the coaching staff. A great leader wins the ultimate goal in the NBA, which is to win multi championships. (28-Year-Old Male)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a great speaker & had a great way to communicate his ideas to the community. He worked hard for what he wanted to see, a change that will affect all people. (23-Year-Old Female Student at UWM)

I think of people who are confident, passionate, and can speak to move people. Leaders are those who show that they have the energy and ability to lead people into positive change as well as become a follower and learn what people need to be able to create change. An example would be Bernie [Sanders]. (Phoua Kue)

I do think of leaders as President Obama and Rep. Jonathan Brostoff who are expressive of their policies to help people. (Adam Vue, Graduate Student at UWM)

“On a grander scale, I’ve always admired Dr. King, his approach of moving his community and the nation towards progress through peace. Truly inspiring!”

Jesus is the best example of leaders. (30-Year-Old Female)

Immediate Family Members

Some participants mention parents generally while others specify that either their father or mother is their leader. Examples include the following comments:

The only leader I know closely is my father. However, he is a clan leader from the old generation, stubborn and unwilling to change from his ways and ideologies. (Tou Vang Xiong)

My older brothers are leaders to me. They help to guide me and the younger ones. (Seelai Yang)

My dad and my elders because they have a lot of experience and people respect them. Kong Kou Yang, Personal Care Assistant)

My mom, who is a strong Hmong woman. (Kou Vang, Commissions and Case Preparation at CPS Horizon Financial)

My father because he's been a known clan activist for many years and [has] settled conflicts. (Lojeng Xiong)

When I think of leaders I think of my mom and my older sisters. Growing up I only had my mom and my older sisters to show me how to do things and to show me what's right and what's wrong. I learned a lot from them. (22-Year-Old Female Student at UWM)

I think of our parents' generation, and my parents. They are the reason why we the younger generation can do what we do now. They came to this country having to start life over, learning a new language and adapting to American culture. Leaders are those who can adapt to change and strive for success. (23-Year-Old Male Student at UWM)

My parents are my leaders, because there are so many people who depend on them and look up to them. They are very wise and knowledgeable. They are also very supportive and helpful. (25-Year-Old Female Participant)

On a personal level, I've always viewed my paternal grandmother as a leader. She has always had a unique role in Hmong society, being outspoken and unafraid to go against the norm. Perhaps she is able to gain respect from men because she's a shaman. (Pahoua Xiong)

My mother because she wants the best for her children. (Student at HAPA)

My parents. They are active in the community and they are well-known. People can talk to them about anything and they say positive things about them. (Gaozong Moua, Technical Support Analyst with ARI Network Services)

I always think of my father and uncles. They are very educated with old traditions. (Mary Jane Xiong, Bank Teller)

Leaders are the ones who put others' needs before their own. They have nothing to gain. Their purpose is to help others thrive. My father is a great example of this. Since he knows zaj tshooj and txiv xaiv (wedding and funeral songs) everyone always asks for his service and advice. (Joudee Moua, Graphic Designer)

Clan Leaders

Some participants mentioned individuals from their clan who others respect. A 32 year-old female wrote, "I think of my husband's clan leaders when it comes to larger issues as that's

how it's always been.” According to Cher Chee Moua, leaders are “individuals from the Moua clan that are selected to represent members of the Moua clan.” Pang Thao simply stated, “Our clan leader is Zongsae Vang so everything we rely on him.” Clan leader Chai Pao Thao added, “I think about clan leaders. We are collaborating more now than in the past. We are thinking about our Hmong people first.” It should be noted that a few participants are critical of clan leaders based on personal experiences and observations. While they do acknowledge them, they also do not see clan leaders as impartial mediators. A 39 year-old female wrote, “I once believed in these so-called leaders until I had family issues. When brought to these so-called leaders I was told to be patient, claim the accusations because I was the daughter-in-law. I was told that I was ‘wrong’ no matter if I was right because that was my role as a ‘Hmong daughter-in-law’.”

General Vang Pao

Interestingly, General Vang Pao (deceased) is identified as a good Hmong leader by some in the immigrant and second generation. Elders often highlight the contribution Vang Pao made during the U.S. Secret War in Laos and how that paved the way for Hmong migration to the U.S. Several sample comments from the younger generation include:

General Vang Pao because he is our Hmong people's first leader. (Green Lue Her)

When I think of leaders, I think of our Hmong veterans in the Vietnam War and General Vang Pao. (Mai Chue Yang)

General Vang Pao was the greatest leader in the Hmong community up to his death. Although he was a controversial leader, he was still a great leader because through his leadership during the Vietnam War, the Hmong were able to come to the United States. If not for General Vang Pao, the Hmong would still be in the Lao mountains for all we know. (MayChee Yang)

A variety of Hmong individuals

Several participants identify Hmong individuals outside of Wisconsin. One person stated, “Tou Ger Bennett Xiong – he has been a strong voice for our Hmong community. In addition, he's younger, but fluent in Hmong & English” (36-Year-Old Female). See Lor adds, “I think of people like Mai Neng Moua. She has stepped away from some of the cultural disadvantages but still holds strong to her roots. She is a strong Hmong woman.” Sam Lee added:

At this moment, I see teachers as the Hmong community leaders. They have the greatest impact on the younger Hmong generation. The older generation relies on their children and the younger generation no longer looks to the older generation for support because it is a different country. It is a country in which values and skills have changed.

Characteristics of a Good Leader

When asked to describe what makes someone a good leader, storytelling circle participants came up with an extensive list of characteristics that are categorized as follows with most to least frequently mentioned.

Open-minded and Willingness to Serve All.

General Comments

Person who understands diversity. Regardless of race, we are all human beings. A leader must support everyone regardless of their racial background. (Cher Chee Moua)

Being able to have an open mind to generate change and move forward w/ideas that benefit everyone within a community. (23-Year-Old Male Student at UWM)

In my opinion, a leader has to be open-minded, reflective, humble yet honest, willing to comfortably listen and learn about other people's life experiences and share their own. Also, honest and genuine and has a vision of light. Someone who is willing to be open, put in action what they say they will do. Committed and dedicated to their goal. Team builder and positive. (28-Year-Old Female)

Someone who is available to their followers, flexible and open-minded. They are able to gain trust in their followers and they also trust their followers. They know how to lead with a firm but gentle hand. (Kao Hlee Lee)

They have to really adapt to changes instead of staying in the past, must be willing to listen to new ideas and not be biased. (Student at HAPA)

Treat everyone and anyone equally, whether they are black/white/Asian etc., female/male, and young/old. A leader is someone one who cares about everyone not just someone close to him/her. Someone that treats everyone and anyone equally. (Ka Lovang, Community Health Worker at SEAED)

“A leader needs to speak to all generations. Acknowledge the past, represent the present, and motivate the future.”

Specific to Clan Leaders

A good leader has a kind heart, a good role model that tells us what's right and what's wrong, Hmong must love Hmong. (Nalee Her)

A leader should be able to reach across all clans, not just theirs. This is real tough! A leader needs to speak to all generations. Acknowledge the past, represent the present, and motivate the future. A leader needs to make hard decisions and go against what's expected sometimes. A leader should be visible and engaged in the community. (Jou Xiong)

I don't have formal education, but I'm committed to helping my family. As in traditional Hmong culture, I learn from my parents and clan leaders. As leaders, we have to get along with everyone we serve. We are more servants than leaders. It is important to not put yourself up so high. (Chai Pao Thao)

Don't think too much of yourself. Take care of your wife and kids and help others genuinely. (Cha Tro Lo)

Visionary, Integrity, and Trustworthy

They have to be optimistic, have a clear vision for the future, be a people person, and be able to bridge different segments of the community. (Chia Xiong)

A good leader has to be a visionary that's able to be grassroots based and create movement within a community. Being able to take criticism, be empathetic, listen and take action. (Pahoua Xiong)

Someone who is passionate, honest, & has our best interests at heart. Someone who is open & truly cares about others & causes. Someone who is not afraid of change. (Mai Her-Lee, Program Supervisor at Coalition for Children, Youth and Families)

They are confident and many people trust them. A leader should ask for advice and lead the best way for everyone. Someone trustworthy, picks the right path (but you never know until it happens), someone who everyone can believe in. (Nou Thao)

Firm & unwavering to their beliefs and morals; lead by example; great (motivational) speaker. (23-Year-Old Female Student at UWM)

Fair and Flexible

A good leader is someone who can help solve problems without being bias[ed]. (23-Year-Old Female Student at UWM)

A good leader listens to both sides of the story before coming up with a solution to help others. They are unbiased. They are open to new ideas and motivate others to succeed. (Joudee Moua)

Not take criticism personally and be willing to change. (24-Year-Old Male Student at UWM)

They must be impartial, fair to everyone, provide clear guidance for everyone. They must also possess qualities of trust, honesty. I must be able to have confidence in their decision making capabilities. (32-Year-Old Female)

Open and empathic person that is also strong willed and not afraid to speak the truth. (Tria Moua, Stay at Home Mom/Customer Service Representative with Swiss Calling)

Be able to make tough decisions because you can't please everyone. A leader is someone who is decisive. (34-Year-Old Female)

Someone who has the abilities to adapt, listen and resolve issues with no bias. Strong minded person but has the charisma to be willing to make changes. (Lojeng Xiong)

Good Communicator/Listener

Many participants identify not only speaking abilities but also listening skills as fundamental to being a good leader. Listening to the needs of the people they serve is considered essential.

There are a lot of things that make a good leader. Most importantly communication and respect. You need to be a good communicator not only when you talk but also being a good listener. Having respect is also important so you know how to treat others but also how you should be treated. (25-Year-Old Female)

A good leader leads as well as listens. They know how to listen as much as they speak. They are able to identify issues and resolve it in an appropriate demeanor and process. (Marina Thao, Student at Alverno College)

Knowledgeable/Educated/Credible

A good leader is someone who is honest, hardworking, committed, experienced, thoughtful, and willing to listen. I feel like education is very important and critical in the leadership role, but not always the case. (Houa Xiong)

They are smart, they have some kind of experience (expertise), wise, look at the whole picture, understanding, kind, honest, and talkative. (20-Year-Old Male Student at UWM)

Courageous. Knowledgeable. Educated. Generous. These are necessary to be a leader who will help our Hmong people become prosperous. (Green Lue Her)

Education is very important. Follow through and do as you say. But, although we value elders, we need to have a sense of self-worth to say things when what elders are saying is not right. (Vang Pao Xiong)

Prioritize greater good/passionate

Passionate about the job/task. Sometimes we choose people based on family relations and not how passionate they are to help others. (Zang Thao Moua)

A person who's passionate and can command the implicit respect from people. (Kou Vang)

Someone who is genuinely working to make things great for the greater good of the community instead of his/her own personal agenda. (Tou Vang Xiong)

“Sometimes we choose people based on family relations and not how passionate they are to help others.”

Who are Hmong community leaders in the Milwaukee Area?

Chia Xiong was one of the few who could name his clan leader. He shared, “My Xiong leader is my uncle Teng, the Milwaukee leader is Nyia Thav Xiong.” A HAPA student wrote, “I know my father is one; he is a group leader for the Hmong clan. He is the president of the Vue clan in Milwaukee.” The overwhelming majority, however, struggled when asked to identify Hmong community leaders in the Milwaukee area. Many are in fact apologetic that they do not know who the leaders are. With the exception of clan leaders who know each other, “I don’t know who the Hmong leaders are in Milwaukee,” is the most common response given by participants. Some explain that it is due to their lack of involvement in the Hmong community while others simply say there are no visible leaders. Mai Lao Thao’s statement best describes the difficulty of coming up with leaders, “I can’t think of a strong Hmong leader that is really moving the Hmong community towards progress. In general, leaders that make impact at the local level would include clan leaders and pastors.” Non-clan leaders acknowledge the existence of clan leaders, but very few are able to name their respective clan leader or any other leaders. Sample representative perspectives include the following:

“I don’t know who the Hmong leaders are in Milwaukee.”

There is a nomination process and then an election process for clan leaders, but I don’t know who the current leaders are in Milwaukee. (MayChee Yang)

I don’t know who the leaders in the council of 18 clans are but I recognize their existence. (William Xiong)

I respect a lot of Hmong individuals as leaders, but would not be able to identify specific Hmong community leaders or tribal leaders. (Billy Xiong, Owner of Jackee Milwaukee’s Sports Bar and Restaurant)

Honestly, I am not quite sure who the Hmong leaders in Milwaukee are. I just know that there are clan leaders but other than that, I’m pretty clueless. (Phoua Kue)

In all honesty, I do not feel as though there is a specific person who lives in Milwaukee that represents the Hmong community. I feel as though we definitely have leaders (*coj noj coj ua*) within clans only. (32-Year-Old Female)

Because most participants had difficulties identifying specific leaders, some simply provided names of pastors, shamans, elders, Hmong professionals, advocates, and student organization

officers. Some frankly state that there are no Hmong leaders. As Sherry Her puts it, “There are no leaders now. I hope to see some in the near future.” Sam Lee added, “Hmong are still waiting for a leader. We need to be leaders and not just wait around.”

Chapter 6

Anticipated Challenges and Vision for the Future

Those who were interviewed and participated in storytelling circles were asked open-ended questions to identify future challenges that they believe Hmong Americans in the Milwaukee area will face and what they envision for Hmong Americans in the next five to ten years. The open-ended questions gave people an opportunity to discuss what is important to them. Many of the responses touch on issues discussed earlier.

Future Challenges

Future challenges that participants highlighted are categorized as follows:

Dealing with Issues Confronting Other Americans

The overwhelming majority feel that Hmong Americans will confront similar issues as other Americans, ranging from poor housing to income inequality, racial bigotry, and political disenfranchisement. They believe that unless the environment in which they live improves, they will not be immune to larger social, economic, and political problems.

Balancing Hmong Cultural Practices with Societal Expectations

A large number of participants express concerns about balancing Hmong cultural practices with expectations from the larger society. For some, this is simply reflected in the inability of the younger generation to speak Hmong language and understand cultural practices and values. For others, it means finding a way to embrace the best of both worlds. As Joe Campbell put it, the biggest challenge is “maintaining the family integrity and blending the cultures without losing theirs.” George Hinton offers a nuanced assessment of the situation:

More internal transition between the generations will be difficult... What do you hold onto from your culture and what do you let go of? This society is very different from the tribal/clan arrangement. There needs to be baseline growth in education and room given to that in the more western culture. Maybe a dialogue at times needs to be forced, especially between generations. The younger generation needs to understand and value their cultural heritage, and the older generation needs to listen to the young and try to understand them. From the African American perspective, I feel the Hmong will be fine. They do not face the same challenges African Americans face even though they've [African Americans] already been here 400+ years. (George Hinton)

Having a Disengaged Educated Class

Many participants fear that the educated class will continue to be uninvolved in efforts to help lift the Hmong community and that they will only pursue paths that will improve their personal situations. As Chang Vang succinctly puts it, “It’s difficult to tell what the future will be like, but the problem I see is that we have a lot of hope in our educated community members, but the educated people actually are not helping our Hmong people.”

Struggling with Lack of Motivation

Over and over again, participants worry about community members across the board being unmotivated to change their conditions. For the younger generation, it is the need to embrace learning and be passionate about pursuing a variety of opportunities. May yer Thao's statement best illustrates the broad concerns over an unmotivated community. She stated, "Community members being satisfied with the little they have. If people do not become more engaged, we will be worse off than now. We seem to be struggling and not evolving. We need to change our way of thinking. Many people seem to just be living day by day and not aspiring for more." Others like Maly Yang and Nengmay Vang point out that it is no longer the lack of information that prevents Hmong Americans from improving their lives. Hmong people are not interested in attending traditional workshops and the challenge is finding new ways to engage them.

Vision for the Future

The anticipated challenges and current pressing issues certainly seem overwhelming and a few people adamantly state that they have little hope that the Hmong Milwaukee community can make any significant progress. One person wrote, "I'm sorry, I've lost hope" (39-Year-Old Female). Another said, "It's hard to tell because it won't happen" (35-Year-Old Female). Contrary to such dismal feelings about the future, the vast majority express hope and excitement about what they would like to see happen. Major themes that emerge cover a wide range of areas, including those internal and external to the Hmong population. They are outlined below in the order of most to least frequently mentioned.

Increased Collaboration within the Hmong Community

Participants across generations hold a strong desire to see a unified community where members collaborate and support one another. Representative quotes include the following:

I would like to see intergenerational gaps bridged in the Hmong community; I would like to see the Hmong community/people united as one, be thriving & successful, & open to helping each other grow. I want my parents & grandparents [to] be proud of being Hmong. I want to be proud to be Hmong and have my children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren generations to come to be PROUD to be. (Mai Her-Lee)

To move forward as a people and to build leadership, we do need to work together. We must not think only about our clan. In order for us to have political success in the mainstream community, we must stop segregating ourselves along clan lines. Also, we must have integrity in order for others to respect us. (Xia Fong Thao)

"We must not think only about our clan. In order for us to have political success in the mainstream community, we must stop segregating ourselves along clan lines."

A Hmong community that listens to each other so we can become stronger and closer. I would like the Hmong community to belong and have a voice. (Maly Xiong) I would like to see the Hmong American community in Milwaukee to be more collective, not be so separated as well as come together for supporting and advocating for our rights. (Lysa Chang)

I want people to understand that we have to rise up as one group and not just as individuals. (Seelai Yang)

We have a sense of community. Take some pride in being Hmong. (Tria Moua)

I'd like to see the same unity and continuity that is up there in MN. (Tou Vang Xiong)

No more issues amongst ourselves, no belittling one another but instead, raise one another up to their fullest potential. Other Hmong parents become your parents and others treat your siblings and kids as if they were their own. I would like to see more respect, love and support among the Hmong community. (Phoua Kue)

In 5-10 years, I want my children to feel connected with other Hmong children even if they're not related. (26-Year-Old Female)

“I want people to understand that we have to rise up as one group and not just as individuals.”

Existence of Effective Hmong Leadership

Participants would like to see inclusive processes established to develop and nurture effective leaders. They desire to see leaders that are capable and good role models. A few sample comments regarding how this can be achieved include the following:

I want to see renewed interest in new, young and educated professionals in advancing our Hmong community. We need changed leadership that is based on gathering input from community members and not just our own opinions. We need leaders who are knowledgeable, patient, articulate and sound minded. (Toby Yang)

I would like to see that there are more Hmong leaders in diversified settings. I think it is so exciting to see how Hmong have progressed today in areas like education. I can't wait to see more of that everywhere. (27-Year-Old Female, Social work group)

I would like the Hmong people in Milwaukee to elect someone to serve as a Hmong representative so that whenever there are issues, we easily mobilize. We have historically been a divided people. If we elect someone, then everyone must support the person. (Xia Fong Thao)

I hope to see tangible growth where current leaders mentor younger leaders. I'd like to see Hmong elected officials, more professionals, and increased number of people with various skills. (May yer Thao)

Increased Economic Power

The following representative comments illustrate many participants' hope of seeing greater economic growth in the Hmong community:

Definitely a Hmong business street where local stores and businesses are available. (Adam Vue)

I want to see more wealth for our community at the individual and community level. (May yer Thao)

I want the Hmong community to be prosperous, politically active, and the youth to make an effort to help their community. (Mai Yer Xiong, Undergraduate Student at UWM)

I would like to see [many] more Hmong economic opportunities developed in Milwaukee. I hope to see more Hmong or Hmong sensitive individuals in political offices. (Billy Xiong)

Increased Representation/Participation in the Larger Community

Many participants would like to see more Hmong community members participate in different areas in the larger community, which will contribute to greater representation and visibility. Some go further by encouraging Hmong people to acknowledge biases and stereotypes about other racial groups.

“I believe it’s time we step out of our comfort zone and be a part of the larger community.”

They are such a part of the fabric of our community already and a very positive part. I suspect they will continue to need to become more integrated into systems already in place. (Liz Hammer)

It would be great to see more Hmong representation in non-Hmong organizations. Representation that is beyond family. (Pahoua Xiong)

I believe it’s time we step out of our comfort zone and be a part of the larger community. (E Her, Community Health Worker at SEAED)

A concentrated effort to get people involved. We begin at the neighborhood level and work towards getting people involved in policy discussions by building relationships with the district attorney office and the community. (John Chisolm)

I want us to be open to more races, such as African Americans and Mexicans. We may feel segregated sometimes but we don’t realize how [many] racist and segregated ideas we have toward others too. (Nou Thao)

I would like to see a stronger sense of identity, open-mindedness, a willingness to bridge with other cultures, races, organizations. (Pa Der Ly)

Greater/Positive Visibility in the Larger Community

Participants would like to see greater visibility for the Hmong community that highlights positive developments in diverse areas. They suggest that increased awareness of the Hmong population and its contributions to society is key for this to happen. Some representative quotes include the following:

I want the Hmong community to be known for doing good. (Maika Moua, Product Regulatory Manager with Hydrite Chemical Co.)

Our history is not taught in [K12] schools. I would like to see something added. (Mai Chue Yang, Student at Riverside University High School)

I’d love the general public to learn more, to become more familiar with Hmong culture and language... I don’t remember learning much about the Hmong in history, in school, even though they played a large part. Somehow get the wider public to understand that level of sacrifice, basically what really happened. The Hmong culture put themselves on the line to help the U.S. and then had to flee for their lives. Just becoming more familiar would help. Any Veterans Day, any time we recognize our military, make sure they are included. (Stephen Petro)

“Instead of only negative news about the Hmong, I want to see a change focusing on good news like Hmong making a difference in Milwaukee.”

Instead of only negative news about the Hmong, I want to see a change focusing on good news like Hmong making a difference in Milwaukee. (23-Year-Old Male Student at UWM)

Presence of Political Power

As discussed earlier, Hmong political success in Minnesota and California and other Wisconsin cities, in particular Eau Claire, inspires community members in the Milwaukee area; however, no individual has yet pursued elected office and very few Hmong Americans are invited to serve on commissions and other government posts. Many participants envision that in the near future there will be Hmong elected officials at the local and state level. Green Lue Her frankly stated, “I would like to see members of the Hmong community run for office in Milwaukee.” The following comments show that there is growing interest in realizing some political power for the Hmong community.

“They are a small community so they have to be larger than their size – speak up loudly.”

Get a Hmong American in local office. Increase voter turnout. They could turn elections if they are united and they vote. Proactive engagement with the larger community. They are a small community so they have to be larger than their size – speak up loudly. Again, their assets are that they work hard, are patriotic, etc. (Chris Abele)

I would like to see someone in a prominent role, such as judge, so we can have someone to look up to. (39-Year-Old Male)

I want us to become a powerful voice, one voice, a giant voting block that has political and economic clout. (Chia Xiong)

I would like to see more people involved in mainstream politics and economic development, like the Hispanic community. We now have young people who are bicultural. We need to build bridges between the Hmong and mainstream community. I definitely would like for us to have our people elected to serve the whole community. (Cher Chee Moua)

Mobilized Community for Action

While many envision greater political participation among Hmong in the Milwaukee area, others desire to simply see a mobilized Hmong community to address different issues and concerns. As Amy Xiong eloquently wrote, “Change comes from within. I would like to see an improvement in the Hmong community, but I know it would have to start with my conscious choice to reach out and make that difference.” Other sample comments that demonstrate interest in seeing a more active Hmong community include the following:

“I would like to see an improvement in the Hmong community, but I know it would have to start with my conscious choice to reach out and make that difference.”

I would like to see them mobilize so that their voices can be heard. (31-Year-Old Female)

I hope to see a grassroots movement that engages hundreds of people to move the community forward. (May yer Thao)

I’d like to see a more active, vibrant, collective, and empowered Asian community. (31-Year-Old Female)

I want to see our Hmong people participating in rallies and demonstrations so that people can see that we care. (Nou Thao)

I would like to see a stronger coalition to fight for justice, like the Dylan Yang case. (May Chue Yang)

Balanced Hmong Culture and Traditions is Maintained

Participants hope that Hmong will be able to sustain their culture and its traditions in the future. Many concur with Jou Xiong who stated that she would like “more opportunities for children to learn the Hmong language.” Others spoke about how they want to preserve Hmong culture and its traditions. Some sample comments include:

Same for all communities – I don’t hope for assimilation but for integration, that their culture will thrive. They have to hold on to the basic beauty of their culture, but still be able to take advantage of all we have to offer within the larger western culture. (George Hinton)

I would like to see Hmong people taking on more leadership roles but maintaining cultural values. (Houa Xiong)

I would like us to have our tradition and culture still. Many Hmong are turning to Christianity, but I do hope that shamanism will survive. (Nou Thao)

Availability of Resources to Empower Hmong Community Members

Many participants hope that there will be resources to empower Hmong community members, such as a community or cooperative funeral home, scholarships for students, funds for business expansion, and internships for young people. Representative comments include the following:

I would like to see a Hmong community center here in Milwaukee where we can hold our cultural celebrations. This way we don’t have to consistently seek places to rent for such events. (Xai Lee Vang)

If we truly care about our people, then I’d like to see something like a cooperative funeral home where we don’t have to pay so much for funeral services. It would be great to have a facility where we only pay the expenses, like utilities and water. The way it works now is that it’s all privately owned and it costs families so much money. Those who are doing well financially are ok, but for those who do not have much, it can break a family. (Wang Xiong Her)

I would like to see more mental health resources. It would be great to have a support system that helps to build self-esteem enabling our community members to feel positive about themselves. (Pa Der Ly)

I hope to see Hmong businesses in technology and manufacturing support Hmong families in Milwaukee in terms of jobs and internships. (Sam Lee)

I hope to see a lifestyle change. We need to create something for people to consume using media. All of the homemade Hmong movies are promoting negative behaviors. If this is all people have access to then how else can they learn about positive behaviors. (Bobby Vang)

Existence of Outlets for sharing information

A small group adamantly indicates that they hope to see additional ways to share information and community news. They discuss how other large Hmong populations have

newspapers and TV shows. They would like to see more collaboration with existing news outlets and the establishment of a Hmong TV show for the Milwaukee area.

Chapter 7

Recommendations

As previously mentioned, this environmental scan will help to guide the planning and execution of a multigenerational leadership training program during Phase II. Partner organizations will be responsible for finalizing the content of the program; however, advisory committee members discussed the findings and collectively recommended the following steps to be taken during Phase II and beyond:

- Create a coalition of interested stakeholders to identify, cultivate, and nurture individuals to represent Hmong interests in the larger community;
- Develop a multigenerational leadership training program that includes Hmong and larger community values that lead to a united and empowered Hmong American community;
- Compile a directory of local clan and sub-clan representatives and raise awareness about their roles and responsibilities;
- Develop opportunities that will lead to greater communication and cooperation within the Hmong American community;
- Identify ways to make Hmong contributions more visible; and
- Establish a mentoring program for parents and children that will enable them to maintain Hmong culture and traditions.

Conclusion

This report has provided insights into the lives of former Hmong refugees and their children in the Milwaukee area. Migration across the globe meant that most refugees experienced disruption and a sense of disconnect from all things familiar. Personal and external factors influenced Hmong decisions to locate here to form an ethnic community. Forming community in Milwaukee for the Hmong population required many courageous endeavors, such as renting and buying homes and starting businesses in poor and crime-plagued areas. While they are overall a very small percentage of the state's population, most have chosen to live in this area because of education and employment opportunities, which, by contrast, are more limited in smaller Wisconsin cities and towns. As part of Milwaukee's rich ethnic history, the Hmong are merely continuing the chain migration that earlier immigrants to this city practiced. If the last few decades can tell us anything about their settlement in this area, it is that they want to not only try to survive but also to provide their families with strong communities. Many are invested in this area and their ability to build a cohesive ethnic community will facilitate greater representation in the larger Milwaukee community. Community members' participation in this study has begun the process of Hmong Americans helping to create a shared vision for the future.

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¹ Some respondents also participated in storytelling circles. While their information is included in the inventory results, all survey respondents are not included in the total number of study participants. The 178 includes oral history interviewees, storytelling circle participants, and key informant interviewees only.

² Community leaders in the Milwaukee area suggest the population is more likely around 15,000.

³ In Hmong religious practices, Shee Yee is the first shaman sent by the Creator to help provide spiritual support to the Hmong people.

⁴ Electronic communication with Ge Xiong, July 28, 2016.

⁵ Telephone communication with Dao Vang, July 26, 2016.

⁶ Again, note that this is not a random sampling of the Milwaukee Hmong population. Partner organizations and advisory committee members administered surveys with those in their networks. The survey is skewed toward those who are literate.

⁷ According to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016 guidelines, a family of four making less than \$24,300 is considered to be living in poverty.

⁸ In storytelling circles where there were more than five people, participants provided written responses to the leadership questions. Some people did not put their names on the forms.