

## Hmong deserve our help

By Bill McEwen  
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A promise was made during a secret war in the jungles of Southeast Asia: Help the United States fight communism, and we'll take care of you.

Some 40 years later, about 3,000 Hmong whose families sided with the United States during the Vietnam War are preparing to leave Thailand and start new lives in Fresno.

The refugees will be embraced by relatives who settled during previous waves of Hmong immigration and community groups determined to help them succeed.

But it's still not clear if the United States truly will keep its promise. I say that because local leaders are scrambling to find decent housing for the refugees, some of whom will land here by the end of June.

Compared to camp conditions at Wat Tham Krabok, where they live now, most anything with running water will be an improvement. And for the short term, they'll do OK living with sponsor families.

But if large Hmong families are shoveled into cramped, unhealthy slums when they set out on their own, experience tells us all of Fresno will deal with consequences such as drug use and gang involvement for decades to come.

This should be obvious to the federal government, which announced the resettlement last December with a four-paragraph statement.

"The brevity of that announcement is completely different than the impact the resettlement is going to have," says Rev. Sharon Stanley, executive director of Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries.

"I am certainly concerned about housing, but we will not panic."

Sharing her concern are members of Congress from California, Minnesota, Wisconsin and North Carolina -- four states receiving large numbers of Hmong immigrants.

"The levels of commitment we're getting right now aren't really encouraging," says Rep. Cal Dooley, D-Fresno.

On Tuesday, a bipartisan delegation of 12 representatives from those four states urged the Office of Refugee Resettlement to help. Among those joining Dooley were Rep. George Radanovich, R-Mariposa; Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia; and Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced.

Minus federal aid, Fresno leaders are trying to fix the problem by tapping their own budgets and relying on the good will of volunteers.

This week, Fresno City Council Member Jerry Duncan proposed a \$1.95 million Hmong resettlement fund, but it will be a tough sell to a council wrestling with other priorities.

"I think this is going to be an emergency situation," Duncan says. "We have a real obligation to help them. We need to let them know that we appreciate what they did for our country."

Stanley wants mayors and governors from the four states to unite and lobby federal officials together, instead of individually.

"This is the time for the conversation to be bumped up beyond the city level," Stanley says.

Credit Stanley for having a plan that might work. But, really, it shouldn't be this difficult.

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Given how hard the Hmong fought for us, the Bush administration needs to do right by them.

They deserve to begin the American dream with decent roofs over their heads.

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