

MHSA – Innovative Strategy Proposal

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ISSUES/NEEDS:

There are approximately 10,000 Southeast Asian (SEA) community members in Merced County, the majority of who are first-generation Americans. This includes the more than 800 new Hmong refugees who settled here starting in 2004. This community has had a particularly difficult time adjusting to Western society due to cultural and linguistic differences, and continues to face social disadvantages, including low levels of education, and linguistic isolation.

For the SEA community, adjustment to American life has been a major stressor, particularly for individuals who came to the United States as adults. A prevalent theme within the SEA community is the difficulty of adjusting to new family roles in the U.S. These new roles create friction in marital relationships as well as intergenerational conflicts between parents and children. Difficulties coping with these new roles lead to spousal conflict, parent-child conflicts, domestic violence, and suicide.

Language barriers continue to be significant within this community. The majority of the SEA community members are unable to read and write English. This hampers their daily lives and causes much stress for the individual. SEA families rely heavily on family members and refugee assistance agencies to assist them with their daily concerns, whether it is dealing with a service agency, landlords, utilities, or reading the mail. For example, a SEA individual who does not speak English may get several mailings per day, and becomes stressed over that fact that they may be important but she cannot tell the difference and she has no transportation to seek assistance. She may also have to deal with her landlord who she cannot communicate with. Tomorrow

more mailings arrive, and new stressors are added on, intensifying stress levels which can lead to depression and/or anxiety.

Limited English skills also make it difficult for SEA community members to obtain employment, which contribute to financial problems for many SEA families. The inability to obtain employment and meet basic needs is a significantly large source of stress for SEA community members.

Trouble accessing needed services is also a prominent theme for SEA families, causing stress and depression. Community members have difficulty obtaining services due largely to language and transportation. The language barrier hinders their ability to navigate social services, health systems, transportation, and other mainstream community resources due to difficulties communicating their needs adequately to service providers. This prevents them from contacting service providers directly when they need assistance. The lack of transportation makes it extremely difficult for SEA community members to access services as these service providers are often located far from each other.

Adjustment to Western society is especially difficult for the new Hmong refugee families, who have lived in Thai refugee camps for more than 30 years prior to coming to the U.S. They came to the U.S. with little or no English language and job skills. These families are particularly vulnerable to stress and depression because their livelihood depends on public assistance, which expires once they have been here for 60 months. In the short 5 years that these families have been here, English language attainment has been difficult due to the fact that they have had no formal schooling. Employment opportunities are scarce for this community, and difficult to obtain as it is hampered by limited English skills and no formal job training or skills. As most of their family members are new Hmong refugees themselves, they cannot turn to them for assistance. Thus, they rely mainly on ethnic community-based organizations for assistance.

Mental health issues are not easily recognized by the SEA community. Often, mental health illnesses go untreated. Not understanding mental health, SEA community members do not have the necessary skills to cope with daily stressors. Without necessary information, resources, and the skills to deal with daily stress, SEA community members develop more critical mental health illnesses such as anxiety and depression. With many already affected by posttraumatic stress disorder, daily stressors only exacerbate their mental well-being.

The SEA community values the interdependency among families and community members. Families trust these individuals for key decision making and information. However, these elder leaders also lack English language skills and are unable to assist them with navigating services.

Based on many community meetings and conversations with SEA members and leaders, social service and employment needs are two of the major needs for the SEA community. A lack of these services triggers stress for SEA individuals. Therefore, a key factor in addressing the issues affecting the mental health of SEA families should include SEA community-based organizations with bilingual and bicultural staff members to handle social service and employment needs. SEA families trust these organizations that they have established relationships with, and feel comfortable seeking assistance from such agencies. It is essential for these organizations to be engaged in preventing mental health within the SEA community, and to ensure progress in addressing adjustment issues.

Several critical **areas of need** to be addressed include:

1. Social Services (i.e. Information, Referrals, Translation/Interpretation, etc.)
2. Employment Services (i.e. job training, job search assistance, job coaching, resume/application assistance, etc.)
3. Mental health screenings/assessments & Follow up
4. Accessible Services
5. Transportation

STRATEGIES/SOLUTIONS:

Some of the strategies that are needed to address the issues afflicting the mental wellness of the SEA community include the following:

1. **Integrated Services Approach** – Culturally appropriate family centers with a wide range of services and supports (i.e. employment services, social services, youth and family services, mental health services, etc), including mental health screenings/assessments to address the basic and multiple social services and economic needs of the SEA community. This would consist of a combination of mental health services, social services, and employment services assisting SEA families with acculturation difficulties to reduce stress and mental health symptoms. Employment services (i.e. job training, job coaching, job search assistance, etc.) will provide opportunities for SEA individuals to gain job skills and obtain employment. With support and services from community based organizations, SEA families can become self-sufficient.
2. **Living Skills Building** – Mental health assessments, prevention services, and follow up services should be provided in conjunction with social services. Individuals will be assessed for stress when they come in for social or employment services on issues related to adjustment, employment, health, domestic violence, transportation, etc. Culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health prevention services will be provided if needed. Individuals will learn coping skills and how to handle daily life, as well as community resources. In addition, there will be thorough follow up of clients to ensure positive client progress.
3. **Home-based and office-based services** – Services must be accessible to clients. Services will be primarily office-based, but home-based services will be provided when needed.

4. **Transportation** – Transportation services should be provided with services for community members who do not have access to transportation. The provision of transportation will allow more community members the opportunity to utilize mental health and social services.

PROJECTED RESULTS:

The proposed strategies to provide comprehensive social, employment, and mental health prevention services to the SEA community will ensure better social adjustment, promote wellness, and eliminate disparities in mental health care for this community.

In particular, SEA families and community members will have an increased knowledge of available resources and coping skills to handle daily stressors to ensure that stress levels do not escalate. They will know where to seek assistance, and will feel comfortable seeking these services as they are provided by bilingual, bicultural staff, and that all these services are provided in one location. Individuals who encounter stressors for the first time can access services and information that is readily available in order to prevent stress levels from getting worse.

With the utilization of a mental health stressor screening tool, SEA community members' stress levels will be identified so that appropriate services can be provided in a timely manner to alleviate stress, and to ensure that stress levels do not escalate into larger issues.

With integrated social services, employment services, and mental health prevention services all in one place, there will be increased social support networks. This will highly reduce daily stresses for families, improving the mental, emotional, and physical well being of SEA community members. Social services and employment assistance combined with mental health prevention skills will make a difference in self-esteem and family success. Consequently, the additional social support from this proposed comprehensive services strategy will reduce the onset of stress and depression within the SEA community.