

JAMIE K XIONG-VANG

There are many vulnerable communities in the Central Valley. From immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer) youth, suicide among the youth, and the elderly. While there are many distinct ethnic communities in the Central Valley, I will focus on the southeast Asian community, and more specifically the Hmong community. Based on the last census, there are just over 24,000 Hmong living in Fresno County.

Immigration

Probably one of the most vulnerable communities in the Central Valley are those who are undocumented, especially with the existing immigration climate we find ourselves in. We are probably aware or are somewhat aware of the undocumented Hispanic community that resides in the Central Valley. However, in the last 10 years, I've seen in my immigration practice that there are more in more southeast Asian undocumented individuals seeking a path to legalization. In addition, I have found that this issue isn't limited to the Central Valley. Almost on a weekly basis, I get a call from someone of southeast Asian descent looking for immigration advice, looking for a way to legalize his or her status here in the US. Many of these individuals have been living in the shadows for many years in the US. It is common to hear that they are finally calling me, after so many years, because they have heard from others that I will provide them with the advice and will not report them to immigration. For these individuals, when I talk about confidentiality and how that is one of my most important legal obligations to clients and that anything they tell me will not be disclosed to anyone, including the Government, they are completely surprised. It is almost as if they do not quite believe my attestation to be true because the next question will usually be, "The government can't force it out of you?" Or something along those lines. Unfortunately, like many undocumented persons living in the Central Valley, there are a few services available to them.

Over the last ten years, the southeast Asian community's immigrant population has changed from those immigrating mainly as refugees to family based immigration. There are still those who were immigrating as refugees or asylees in the southeast Asian community but those cases are becoming fewer and fewer. One immigration pattern that I've noticed in the southeast Asian community that surprises me is the number of youth who are immigrating foreign national spouses and/or fiancés. The Southeast Asian community is not immune to the phenomena of older men returning to the home country, or going to a foreign country, and marrying a younger spouse. What has been surprising is the number of young men, who are highly educated, and are doing well financially, who come through my immigration practice, who are marrying or have married a young woman from their parents' home country. Obviously there has not been a whole lot of study done regarding the impact that this has on the immigrating woman's lives and their ability, or even their perceived ability, to understand the rights that they have in this country.

Language Access

Another issue that continues to be problematic is language access. Here, more specifically, I am referring to language access in the context of immigration and the courts. When accessing immigration services, there are no interpreters, so immigrants seeking immigration services are on their own. So, what happens is immigrants are using their very young children as interpreters. Even as an attorney, representing non-English speaking clients, there are situations where I am questioned by immigration officers regarding the necessity of an interpreter when I myself may need an interpreter to represent my client's interest. Many times, the cost to hire a qualified

interpreter becomes very cost prohibitive for immigrants who are seeking immigration benefits. When you tell an immigrant, making minimum wage, who is also the sole source of income for his/her family, that an interpreter will be anywhere between \$75.00 - \$150 per hour and that there is a 2-hour minimum, it becomes a real financial issue for them and their desire to access immigration services and benefits.

The same is true of the courts. While there are laws that state that an interpreter must be provided, the truth of the matter is, the courts here in the Central Valley are not adequately staffed such that an interpreter is reasonably available to litigants. There are instances where litigants' court hearings are continued so that an interpreter can be provided, sometimes continued several times for lack of interpreters, or they are told to bring their own interpreter at their own expense. This creates a situation where there is mistrust of the legal and judicial system. Our judicial system is not perfect, but it's one of the best and fairest, if not the best and fairest, in the industrialized world. However, every system, requires that the community it serves believe and by into its fairness. When there is lack of access and or the perception of lack of access because of language issues, it becomes harder for the community, in this case, the Southeast Asian Community to believe that the systems works for them and represents their interest.

LGBTQ

One of the issues that has become more and more prevalent in the southeast Asian community and particularly, the Hmong community, is the number of individuals coming out as LGBTQ and the community's reaction to it. While there are those who are supportive, there are many more who are unable to accept the LGBTQ community. Many times, there is outright hostility towards an individual who has come out as being LGBTQ, other times there is a lack of acknowledgment of a person's coming out. For example, a person coming out to family that he or she is gay or is lesbian will be completely ignored; there are no questions asked, no acknowledgment, there is simply silence, and then the topic moves on to some other mundane thing and it's as if the person never came out. This issue has been especially difficult to deal with in the Hmong community because there is no information or very little information available to families regarding this issue. As with most used today, the Hmong LGBTQ community has tried to develop support of each other on social media. The most pressing need is education regarding LGBTQ so that the larger southeast Asian community does not continue to see LGBTQ persons as other.

Suicide Among Hmong Youth

The Hmong community has seen an increasing number of Hmong youth suicides in the last two decades. Despite early prevention attempts through the school system, suicide among Hmong youth continue to be an issue the community struggles with. The struggles that Hmong youth have with identity, lack of cultural awareness, racism, and mental health are but some of the reasons for the uptick. For example, in the last year alone, my two sons, in their early twenties, have lost friends, yes, friends – plural, to suicide.

Mental Health

Despite attempts to bring mental health issues to the forefront in the Hmong community to address the stigma associated with mental health services, there are deep rooted cultural ideologies that prevent that from happening. Therefore, there continues to be a lack of utilization of mental health services in the Hmong community. There is a deep misunderstanding of the need for mental health services in the community and it is stereotypically associated with being "crazy." For example, there is not an understanding, in the general Hmong community, that mental health could be tied

to something like feelings of lack identity that could help in the community's struggle with youth suicides.

The Hmong In Transition

Lastly, the above issues are not unique to the Hmong Community, but they unique impact the Hmong Community because of the lack of information that is available. This is increased by the generation gap that exists. There are those who immigrated to the United States as refugees, mainly our parents, and grandparents. There are those who immigrated to the United States as older children or teenagers who are torn between walking this very small border between what is culturally acceptable and trying to fit into mainstream American society. There are those who were born her, like myself, and whose home is America. The increase in inter-racial marriages, primarily among Hmong women to non-Hmong men has led to increased pressure to uphold the patriarchal system. The same can be seen with the increasing independence of woman (especially financially), where women's worth and value continue to be tied to the male figure in their life. For example, although I am an attorney, I am reminded at family and community events that I must remember to be respectful and obedient to my husband because it would ruin my reputation and I would bring disgrace to my family if my husband left me; they don't even say "if you leave your husband" – it's always if he leaves me. These issues create an environment for increased misunderstanding and an ever widening gap between the various generations.