

Appendix B: The Cambodian Experience

History of the Khmer People in Asia

The Khmer people are the principal ethnic group in Cambodia and trace their heritage to the Angkor Empire, which existed from the 9th to the 13th centuries and, at its peak, stretched from modern Burma to the South China Sea and north to Laos. The famous Angkor Wat Temple was built in this period, as were an extensive system of canals and dikes that allowed rice cultivation three times a year. Eventually, the Empire faced decay and attacks from the Thai and Cham (from what is now Vietnam) leading to a long period of decline. As the Angkor period ended, the rapid expansion of Theravada Buddhism began, now the dominant religion in the region. In 1863, the king of Cambodia sought protection from the French and, in 1887 it became part of French Indochina. The French governed Cambodia until the Japanese took control during World War II, after which it reverted to the French until 1953 when Cambodia gained full independence.¹ Like Laos, Cambodia was identified as “neutral” in a Cold War sense, as opposed to partitioned like Vietnam. King, then Prince, Norodom Sihanouk formed a political party and attempted to unite Cambodia. As the Vietnam War expanded in the 1960’s, Prince Sihanouk’s efforts to keep his nation neutral were overwhelmed as communist activity increased and he was ousted in a right-wing coup. The United States backed General Lon Nol as head of the Khmer Republic. The Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian communist movement, received support from North Vietnam. The civil war that raged from that point was brutal. It is estimated that 500,000 people died and 2 million were uprooted.²

¹ CIA — The World Fact book — Cambodia, www.cia.gov website.

² Robinson, *Terms of Refuge*, pp. 10.

Phnom Penh is the capital and largest city in Cambodia. When the Khmer Rouge entered the city they found the population swollen with refugees. The Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, called the new government Democratic Kampuchea. Two to five million refugees were forced out of Phnom Penh, initially being told that it was to reduce the likelihood of U.S. retaliatory bombing. In fact, Pol Pot issued an eight point directive to his cadres: (1) Evacuate people from all towns; (2) Abolish all markets; (3) Abolish Lon Nol regime currency and withhold revolutionary currency; (4) Defrock all Buddhist priests and put them to work growing rice; (5) Execute all leaders of the Lon Nol regime starting with its top leaders; (6) Establish high-level cooperatives throughout the country with communal eating; (7) Expel the entire Vietnamese minority population; and (8) Dispatch troops to the borders, particularly the Vietnamese border. Cambodians, ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese fled to Vietnam. As the Khmer Rouge policy of removing all foreigners became clear, many more crossed the border into Thailand. While some hoped that the end of civil war might stabilize things, torture, mass killings and starvation began quickly.³

The world now knows of Cambodia's "Killing Fields." From 1975 until 1979, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, driven by an extreme vision of rural communism, practiced genocide on a national scale. Schools, factories, banks and hospitals were closed. Religions were banned and private property confiscated. It is estimated that 2 million died in this period. There is some dispute as to how many were executed outright or were victims of torture, starvation or disease, but the numbers were staggering in any case. Probably more than 20 percent of the population died between 1975 and 1978. Cities were emptied and brutal forced-labor camps were set up. In addition to supporters of the Lon Nol regime, foreign ethnic groups, religious people and intellectuals were also persecuted and often executed. Family relationships were banned as well

³ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

and communications between family members could result in death. The tremendous suffering and horrible memories have scarred the survivors in many ways, including affecting their mental and physical health.⁴

In addition to swelling Thai refugee camps with both Cambodian and foreign groups from Cambodia, a significant number of Cambodian refugees crossed the border into Vietnam. There were 17,000 Cambodians in Thailand by the end of 1975. Vietnamese leaders said that there were 131,000 Cambodians in Vietnam by 1978 as well as an additional 26,309 foreigners from Cambodia.⁵ At the beginning of 1980, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that the UN was assisting more than 150,000 Cambodians in camps in Thailand and the Joint Mission was providing food to more than 750,000 Cambodians in some 24 encampments along the Thai-Cambodian border.⁶

The Khmer Rouge began invading Vietnamese border provinces in early 1977. Coupled with the already significant numbers of refugees in Vietnam from Cambodia, stories about the atrocities in Cambodia were told. By late 1977, Vietnam responded with attacks into Cambodia, bringing additional refugees with them back across the border. Vietnam had brought people that would form a part of an invasion of Cambodia. Many were killed during this chaotic period, apparently as a result of plans to exterminate witnesses to Khmer Rouge atrocities before Vietnamese forces arrived. Graves from these killings held an average of 100–250 victims, the biggest containing several thousand.⁷ In 1979, Vietnamese forces marched into Phnom Penh, installing the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The Khmer Rouge continued to operate in an area near the Thai border, receiving unofficial Thai support. The United States and other

⁴ Khmer Rouge, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, en.wikipedia.org.

⁵ Robinson, pp. 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 80.

⁷ Cambodian Health Network, website, www.cambodianhealth.org/healthcrisis.asp, pp. 3.

western governments, as well as China, recognized a “Democratic Kampuchea” to indicate opposition to the Vietnamese-backed regime. War continued to ravage the western part of Cambodia. In 1982, all the factions opposed to the Vietnamese-supported government joined together in a “coalition” seeking to rid Cambodia of Vietnamese influence. The UN recognized the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, though they still did not control most of Cambodia. The factions, including the Khmer Rouge; the Khmer Peoples’ National Liberation Front under former Prime Minister Son Sann and Prince Norodom Sihanouk’s FUNCINPEC, controlled refugee camps — complicating aid and keeping conflict alive. In addition to the hardships of all refugee camps, attacks kept these camps militarized. With ongoing Vietnamese and PRK attacks, many fled to Thailand. The conditions in camps were severe; in some there was conscription of refugees into military service. Under either Thai military or Khmer administrators, there were reports of forced relocation, rape, banditry, extortion or physical abuse.⁸ A treaty was signed in 1991 calling for new elections. While the Khmer Rouge resumed fighting in 1992, elections were held and a new government recognized in 1993. Civil war continued however until a cease-fire was agreed to. Elections in 1998 led to a coalition government that has brought relative stability.

Cambodian Community in Long Beach, California

Background

Cambodian refugees that settled in the United States arrived mostly between 1979 and 1986, around 84 percent or 122,228. Few were able to depart before 1979 when the Khmer Rouge lost power and the refugee flow wound down after 1986. Total immigration from Cambodia from 1951 is 195,731. The earliest refugees that arrived after the Khmer Rouge took

⁸ Robinson, pp. 81-92.

over in 1975 numbered about 5,700, largely those with strong connections to the U.S. government and educational backgrounds with either English or French language ability. The bulk of the refugees from Cambodia, however, did not have formal educations, transferable job skills or English language proficiency. Along with the Hmong, they are among the poorest ethnic groups in the state of California, the state of heaviest population concentration.⁹

Cambodian arrivals were not as focused on remaining concentrated as Hmong refugees were. While probably not to the same degree as the Hmong, however, there was also secondary migration as people sought services and relatives that were available in areas of higher concentration. California has the greatest concentration of Cambodian Americans, numbering 84,559 in 2000. Los Angeles County, which includes the City of Long Beach, is the highest concentration within the state, with 35,573 Cambodian residents. Cambodian Americans in California have less-than-half the income of the general population, and 40 percent of California's Cambodian community lives below the poverty line.¹⁰

Many of the Cambodian refugees arriving in the United States came through Camp Pendleton in San Diego, a short distance to the south of Long Beach. In addition, the small group of relatively well-educated Cambodians that lived in the United States prior to the arrival of most refugees included some that had studied at California State University in Long Beach. They played a role in settling the first refugees in the Long Beach area. As other Cambodian refugees went through secondary migration, Long Beach and Lowell, Massachusetts became significant concentrations.¹¹ The 2000 Census numbers Cambodians in Long Beach at 20,262 or 4.4 percent. Community leaders place the numbers as much higher, due to low response to the

⁹ Niedzwiecki, Max, KaYing Yang, Narin Sihavong, Naomi Steinberg, Rong Sorn, Silas Cha, Eloise Needleman, T.C. Duong, Valerie O'Connor Sutter, and Senthience Bosavanh. In press. *Southeast Asians in the United States: A Portrait of an American Community*. Washington, D.C.: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center.

¹⁰ Niedzwiecki, Max and T.C. Duong. 2004 Southeast Asian American Statistical Profile. Washington, D.C.: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC).

¹¹ "The Killing Fields of Long Beach," *Asian Week*, February 12, 2004, pp. 15.

Census, to around 50,000 or about 10 percent of Long Beach's nearly 500,000 residents. It is said that the population represents the largest concentration of Cambodians outside of Phnom Penh.¹²

Whatever the precise number of Cambodians in Long Beach, the community is a significant proportion of the city. Long Beach is a part of the massive urban sprawl of Los Angeles County and surrounding areas. Long Beach is the fifth largest city in the State of California, following Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose and San Francisco. On the west end of Long Beach is the Pacific Ocean, tourist-related development and expensive condominiums. Just to the east, however, there are low-income and working-class communities, including Cambodians, other Asians and Pacific Islanders, Latinos, and African Americans, among others. *USA Today* called Long Beach America's "most diverse city."¹³

Crime and gang activity have been a serious problem in Long Beach, recently for the Cambodian community as well. Detective Sorenson of the Long Beach Police Department reports that there are about 30 homicides involving Cambodian gangs each year, with continuous violence between the Cambodian gangs and Hispanic gangs. Khmer businesses and families face robbery and extortion. Many adults see the gang violence as an extension of the violence of the Khmer Rouge, stealing their children and turning them into strangers, a problem compounded by the very real language and cultural barriers between the generations. Some of the gang violence, in its brutality, does indeed mirror the violence from Cambodia, including the killing of mothers and children.¹⁴

Violence in general is a problem in the Cambodian community and many in the community have their trauma experiences reenacted in the home and the streets. Domestic

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 15.

¹³ City of Long Beach, CA, official website, www.longbeach.gov

¹⁴ Cambodian Health Network, pp. 18.

violence and child abuse is a common form of this, though statistics are difficult to come by as most are afraid to report it both for fear of reprisals and for shame upon family or community. According to Sam Chittapato, Asian liaison officer for the Long Beach Police Department, there are 2,762 cases of Cambodian families involved with the Division of Children and Families because of juvenile problems, domestic violence or child abuse.¹⁵

Behind these problems are the trauma and the resulting depression, social isolation and violence due to the horrific experiences in Cambodia and in refugee camps as well as the continuing stress from coming to a culturally and linguistically different land. Medical and psychiatric professionals have likened the Cambodian reaction to the “*Concentration Camp Syndrome*” identified in the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. In addition to serious physical symptoms are related nervous system and psychiatric conditions. One study found that 40 to 50 percent of the teenagers that lived through the Mahantdorai, or Cambodian holocaust, had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a reaction to life threatening traumatic experience, characterized by a re-experiencing of the trauma, and a numbing of responsiveness along with avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma. Clinical depression is often common among survivors of both the Nazi concentration camps and the Mahantdorai. Studies have also shown that 55 percent of Cambodian adults in a refugee camp in Thailand were clinically depressed. In the United States, the incidence of clinical depression among 69 Khmer teenagers was 53 percent.¹⁶

Dissociation and social isolation seems to be most dramatic among adolescents who were born during the Pol Pot regime. Their isolation has continued into their adulthood. One study of Cambodian high school girls in Rhode Island found that 100 percent of them thought about the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10.

war often, yet only 33 percent thought that other Cambodian adolescents thought about it also. They indicated that their parents talked about it infrequently, despite the obvious impact it had on them. Those that were young or born during the resettlement process know little or nothing about it and certainly do not understand how it affected their parents. A young Laotian man from Cambodia did not know that he came from Cambodia or that his twin brother died under the Khmer Rouge regime. He thought his mother never came out of her bedroom because he caused trouble for the family.¹⁷

A study to be shortly released by Leakhena Nou at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, said that many of the social problems faced by the Cambodian community in the United States today, including depression, suicidal tendencies, low self-esteem and a lack of trust in themselves and others, are rooted in the psychological legacy of the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge. Furthermore, she states that, “It’s not in the Khmer psyche to admit, ‘Oh, I’m so depressed today, can you help me?’ It has a lot to do with saving face.”¹⁸

Utilizing public services or sharing information can add to the isolation and be associated with their original trauma. During the rule of the Khmer Rouge, family and personal histories were compiled for finding inconsistencies or otherwise targeting enemies of the state, often with fatal results. Later, in the refugee camps, inconsistent information led to threats or abuse.¹⁹ This has had an effect on the willingness of many Cambodians to exercise their franchise, since a governmental process that is not mandatory is definitely alien to most in the community; furthermore, the benefit of doing so is indirect and difficult to understand.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ “Study provides first look at effects of suffering on Cambodian Americans,” Michael LaFleur, *Lowell Sun.*, June 13, 2005

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

Project VOTE in Long Beach, CA

The Cambodian American organization that was chosen to implement the local component of Project VOTE is Cambodian Association of America (CAA). CAA is a nonprofit organization providing linguistically and culturally appropriate social, health and employment services to low-income children and families in the Long Beach, California area. It reports that it is the oldest and largest Cambodian organization in the United States, formed in 1975. CAA operates 16 programs funded by federal, state, county, city and private sources. At its peak, CAA had 45 staff and a budget of about \$3 million. Due to recent funding reductions, its current budget is down to about \$2.5 million with about 40 staff people. Over 3,500 people receive direct services from CAA annually and CAA's outreach program reaches over 10,000 people per year. Among the most important programs at CAA are youth, family and domestic violence programs. Programs that teach English speaking and reading as well as programs that teach Khmer language and culture to youth are also priorities. Job training and placement is probably the most popular of CAA programs. Substance abuse and tobacco control programs are supported by local government agencies. This year, along with other cultural preservation programs, CAA helped put on the first Cambodian New Year's parade in Long Beach in June 2005. A weekly Cambodian radio broadcast, focusing primarily on news from Southeast Asia, provides education and information to the community. CAA once had a citizenship program, funded through the Oakland-based Lao Family Association. It was defunded before Project VOTE began.²⁰ CAA did not have the citizenship linkage that WAHMA had and, in this time of severe budget cuts, funds that would have assisted voter registration had been withheld at the state level.

²⁰ Interview with Him Chhim, April 21, 2005.

Project VOTE provided \$20,000 for 21 months to CAA for participation. It provided about 25 percent of the cost of one position. The staff person hired was Dara Din, who staffed the program through most of Project VOTE, but left for more secure employment about a month before the 2004 election. Jenny Heng took over the project in its critical final month. Volunteers were recruited from the community to assist the project.²¹

The Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) met with CAA staff on June 29, 2003 and February 12, 2004 to provide its analyses and findings based upon Census 2000 data. These analyses indicated that: (1) the Cambodian population grew 16 percent from 1990 to 2000, (2) nearly half of Cambodians living in Long Beach who are old enough to vote cannot register because they are not citizens of the United States and (3) a majority of Cambodians living in Long Beach are limited-English proficient and may have difficulties voting in English. This demonstrated that producing bilingual voter materials in Khmer was essential to engage the Cambodian community in voting.

The population targeted by CAA for Project VOTE had to be from the half of the community that are U.S. citizens. Age is an important factor in the Cambodian community, both because of those who might be eligible and those who would be most reluctant to do something new. As explained above, many in the community, especially those with the strongest memories of the Cambodian holocaust, are isolated and reluctant to do something involving unnecessary contact with government agencies. Understanding the importance of elections might also be hard for the oldest to understand. Thus, those in the middle age group, roughly between 30 and 40, are most likely to register. Attempts were also made to educate younger citizens in their 20's on the

²¹ Interview with Him Chhim and Jenny Heng, April 21, 2005.

importance of registering to vote, but while literacy is less of a problem, very few responded to the registration education campaign.²²

While voter registration is traditionally low among young people, the reason why Cambodian youth did not respond was never assessed. Theories offered by staff members included the alienation that many Cambodian youth feel from both the government and their own community leadership. Others felt that the reasons voting could be beneficial were simply not absorbed by young Cambodians.

While CAA did not originally plan for this as part of Project VOTE, a surprise gubernatorial recall election that attracted great popular interest was scheduled in October 2003. In addition, a state proposition of great concern to minority communities was scheduled at the same time. In California, in addition to federal, state and local elections, there is usually a lengthy list of ballot propositions, running from technical changes in statutory language to efforts like Proposition 54 to change major state policies. Proposition 54, which failed, would have barred state and local governments from collecting any information on race, ethnicity or national origin. Every voter receives a booklet before the election that can run to over 100 pages that is very intimidating.²³ Most of Project VOTE systems were not in place, but CAA did hold a forum attended by about 50 people at CAA where state assembly members were invited to discuss the recall election, state budget issues and key propositions including Proposition 54. Initial voter registration education efforts had already begun, so some who registered with assistance by CAA were able to vote in the recall election. Because of the unanticipated timing, voter turnout analysis could not be done. In addition, it is likely that the timing of the election may have

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

confused first-time voters and had an impact on voter turnout in the following year as it has been suggested for the general population.

Another education program was launched prior to the 2004 election with candidates for Long Beach 6th District City Council in December 2003 with about 300 attendees. While additional candidate forums were originally anticipated, it was very difficult persuading candidates to attend a forum targeting a small community that needed translations.

Voter registration is required prior to Election Day in California. AAJC staff provided training to 42 CAA staff on how to perform voter education outreach. CAA was set up as a voter registration and voting information assistance station. Forms and bilingual assistance were provided at the office and some 77 people registered to vote using these forms. CAA staff also identified 37 sites where large numbers of Cambodians visit frequently and contacted them to arrange sites for voter registration education. Registration education activities were undertaken at the following sites:

August 2, 2004 — Kim Long Market

September 18, 2004 — Anh Dong Market

October 2, 2004 — Wat Irap (temple)

October 6, 2004 — Wat Pothiproek (temple) and New Paradise Restaurant

October 9 and 13, 2004 — Wat Khemar Buddhikara (temple)

A booth was also set up at a community health fair. CAA staff and volunteers assisted 154 Cambodian Americans, supplying them with voting information and assistance at the above locations.

Door-to-door outreach is sometimes the most effective, particularly as Cambodians in Long Beach tend to live relatively close together. In addition, between language and social

isolation, many are not reachable by telephone. At the same time, as part of CAA's community outreach designed to promote safety in an area of high crime, many, particularly seniors, were advised not to answer their doors. This limits the effectiveness of potentially the best outreach tool. It was not widely used in 2004 get out the vote (GOTV) efforts. CAA translated several materials into Khmer and distributed them. These included 1,200 "Register and Vote" pamphlets, Proposition 54 information and a Voter Guide on November, 2004 propositions. Utilizing the Cambodian radio show on 106.3 FM, CAA explained the need to register to vote on four different days. On the 2003 recall Election Day, CAA used the radio station to broadcast information on the gubernatorial recall and the propositions on the ballot. CAA published 13 ads in 2 Cambodian community newspapers on voter registration, the recall election and propositions.²⁴

The relatively effectiveness of these techniques has not been adequately assessed. Staff has indicated that the basic brochures explaining the proposition offered in the gubernatorial recall was one of their most well received by potential voters.

2004 Election

On Election Day and in the period shortly before, CAA focused on GOTV activities. The primary method was by making telephone calls. Some 120 people were contacted, including those that CAA had helped register. People were also urged to try absentee voting where they could vote early in their homes. About half of the respondents indicated that they would vote and half gave various excuses for not doing so — being too busy with children or work and limitations in reading English were what staff remembered most. Neither staff nor respondents were aware of existing language assistance at the polls. While CAA has a van, it was committed

²⁴ Ibid.

to other funded uses on Election Day. Volunteers attempted to assist with exit polling, but it was not uniformly handled and results were not clear.²⁵

To get a clearer idea of what worked and what didn't work in getting registered voters to the polls, APALC staff Dan Ichinose prepared lists of Cambodian voters, randomly selecting 20 who didn't vote and 20 who did. Staff then called the list and asked why they voted or not. Although the number of voters surveyed did not constitute a statistically significant sample, the strongest and most consistent response seemed to be that they felt that they wanted to help choose leaders that would well serve the community, the Cambodian American community in particular. Predominant reasons why they did not vote included those who were ill or were not aware of Election Day. Several indicated that they did not know what the candidates stood for — and this even included some who did vote. A number indicated that they would like greater assistance for those who did not speak English.²⁶

There were no Cambodian American candidates on the ballot in Long Beach in 2004. As in Wausau, however, there have been community candidates: a Cambodian woman involved with the Chamber of Commerce once ran unsuccessfully for city council and a former executive director of CAA also ran. Some were aware of them, though fewer apparently than in Wausau, where there have been more numerous candidates in a smaller community.²⁷ Given the fact that community members are interested in what candidates can do for the Cambodian community, it would make sense to promote more candidacies to increase community interest and participation. But since Long Beach is both a bigger city with many other racial and ethnic groups, running for office would be a bigger challenge. It was also suggested that many of the most likely

²⁵ Interview with Jenny Heng, April 25, 2005.

²⁶ Calls reported by Jenny Heng, May, 2005.

²⁷ Interview with Him Chhim, April 21, 2005.

Cambodian candidates moved from Long Beach to surrounding communities with schools with stronger reputations.

On Election Day 2004, the City of Long Beach had a 71 percent turnout of registered voters in total, while a 47 percent of registered Cambodians in Long Beach voted: a 24 percent difference between the two. Lowell, Massachusetts, the city with the next largest concentration of Cambodians in the United States, had a lower turnout of 43 percent, with a 17 percent difference from the general turnout of 60 percent. To the south, the City of San Diego had a 68 percent turnout of registered voters compared to 58 percent of registered Cambodians, a 10 percent difference. When those that were eligible in both 2000 and 2004 are considered, the Cambodian voters of Long Beach had a 46 percent turnout in 2004, a 7 percent drop from the general election in 2000 at 53 percent. Looking at Cambodians in Los Angeles County, the drop was smaller, from 58 percent to 55 percent. For all voters eligible in both elections, there was a drop in turnout from 2000 to 2004. That drop, however, is just 3 percent for Long Beach, as turnout among “dual-eligible” voters decreased from 78 percent in 2000 to 75 percent in 2004. The drop was just 1 percent for all voters in Los Angeles County.²⁸

The bottom line on Long Beach Cambodian voting in 2004 is that it decreased from 2000. For some other concentrations of Cambodian Americans, the differences were mixed: San Diego had a higher turnout and Lowell a lower one in 2004. The reduced Cambodian turnout in Long Beach in 2004 was higher than for Los Angeles. With a decrease, Project VOTE cannot claim to have increased voter participation. On the other hand, new voters were registered and significant voter education methods were attempted.

General elections in Long Beach are conducted by the Los Angeles County Clerk’s office. Deborah Wright, executive liaison officer for the county clerk, indicated that they were

²⁸APALC, Voter turnout for 2000 and 2004 for Long Beach, CA and comparative locales.

aware of the concentration of Cambodian Americans in Long Beach. Ballots are printed bilingually where the population levels meets the Voting Rights Act criteria. While a number of Asian languages qualified under the Voting Rights Act, Khmer is not one of them. There is a box on voter registration forms to indicate that you prefer information in a language other than English. Only 21 indicated Khmer in all of Los Angeles County. In Long Beach city elections, materials are provided in Khmer. Los Angeles County also recruits and trains polling place workers with an emphasis on bilingual workers. In 2004, 24 Khmer speaking polling workers were hired. While not all of them were placed in Long Beach, some of them were. CAA staff, of whom some in past years have attended county clerk recruitment sessions, did not seem to be aware of the presence of multilingual polling place workers and neither, apparently, was the community.²⁹ For bilingual assistance to be effective there should be pre-election publicity about where they will be available. Definitely, the key social service agency for an immigrant community should be aware of and involved in the hiring, recruitment and placement of bilingual workers.

Cambodian turnout in 2004 was higher than Lowell and smaller than San Diego. While the drop in voting for “dual eligible (2000 and 2004)” Cambodians is not what was hoped for, there were reductions for dual eligible Cambodian voters in greater Los Angeles and for all voters in Long Beach and Los Angeles County. There are a number of factors that can explain these figures, but it is difficult to understand why these results were obtained given the information available.

Some of the following facts may have impacted the turnout of the Cambodian community in Long Beach. Long Beach is a large city, but does not seem so within the sprawl of Los Angeles County. Within Long Beach, there are significant numbers of all minority groups.

²⁹ Interview with Deborah Wright, Office of Los Angeles County Clerk, April 22, 2005.

CAA is the main social service agency in Long Beach, but there are a number of other Cambodian organizations including, until recently, another Cambodian community service agency.

Lowell, Massachusetts and the California cities share the fact that they were not in “battleground states.” Consequently, there were no comparable media expenditures and physical presence of national candidates and party workers in those non-battleground cities was simply not comparable to that in battleground locations — which affected how difficult it was to avoid knowing about the election. In addition, the rapid-fire series of elections in California — a general election in 2002, a recall in 2003, a primary in 2004 and a general election in 2004 — may have led to burnout in some voters and confusion in new or potential voters.

Another factor is that of organizational resources. While a large organization, CAA is spread very thin. The agency was not able to fill gaps in personnel needs when they were presented. The severe cuts in state funding levels have had a profound impact on foundation and other resources that are still available. A late vacancy in the Project VOTE staff position limited the effectiveness of GOTV and related efforts. Whereas, WAHMA was able to link citizenship programs with project VOTE and find resources to use for transportation and its own polling site assistance, CAA had none of these resources. There was no transportation assistance, project polling site language workers or a citizenship program to tie into. As a much larger community, Long Beach would require many more staff to perform these functions.

Language and cultural barriers exist for all of these communities, as does the issue of time and inconvenience. While the refugee process has been painful for all Southeast Asians, the unique experiences of Cambodian refugees have created greater burdens and barriers to overcome. There are apparently higher levels of PTSD and depression within this population due

to the Cambodian holocaust. The resulting social isolation makes it harder to coax potential voters out of their homes for something they may not understand. Also, the reluctance a person may have of going through a government bureaucracy for an unfamiliar process with benefits that are indirect, if at all understandable, must be especially challenging for Cambodian Americans who are struggling to move beyond the horror of the Khmer Rouge. The violence and crime that are part of reality in Long Beach are not at all common in rural Wisconsin, making reaching members of the community and getting them to come out of their homes more difficult. The challenges faced by individuals will have an impact on organizations as well. Taking on challenges and devising culturally and historically appropriate ways to change community behavior will take risks and frank exploration of community attitudes, something not easily achieved when the more difficult subjects cannot be easily discussed.

Despite these difficulties, it is clear, that as in Wausau, Cambodian American voters are inclined to support candidates that will serve the needs of their community. More Cambodian candidates could make a difference, as could greater focus on educating the community on relevant issues and the candidates' positions on them. Any programs to increase voting in the future will need to provide greater staffing and other resources so that, for example, transportation and language assistance are available. CAA should have a citizenship program that could be linked to future voting projects. Since citizenship is tied to an increasing number of services and benefits, it is important in its own right, but a strong linkage to voting would provide a steady flow of new registrants. In light of the reluctance to go out to vote, perhaps a more focused absentee ballot campaign would be more effective if coupled with language assistance. Also, greater publicity for and cooperation with the county clerk's office could

produce more bilingual polling assistance. Despite the lower than hoped for voter turnout, CAA learned a lot from participating in Project VOTE.