

IMMIGRANTS PLAN CAPITOL PROTEST

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Body

An estimated 4,000 demonstrators from across Northern California -- including 11 busloads of immigrants from the South Bay -- plan to converge on the state Capitol steps at noon today to demand restoration of public assistance.

The group seeks state legislation to replace benefits the federal government plans to eliminate in August for an estimated 300,000 legal immigrants in California.

"We're taking 10 times as many people from our county as we did for the first rally on March 18," said Richard Hobbs of Santa Clara County Citizenship and Immigration Services. "People feel they want to do something, and the senior centers are very involved this time."

Representatives of about 150 California organizations and their constituents are scheduled to meet with 60 California legislators and Gov. Pete Wilson throughout the day, dubbed "Immigrant Day II," which will include a rally at the Capitol and interfaith services at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral.

Joining Vietnamese, Chinese and Latino permanent residents are the recently arrived Bosnians, Russians and Eastern Europeans. Many are exercising their right to demonstrate for the first time in their lives.

The action was coordinated by the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights, in conjunction with the Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Services of Santa Clara County, a coalition of religious groups, labor councils and ethnic organizations.

"Our goal is to have immigrants speak (directly) to state legislators," said Renee Saucedo, director of the immigrant rights coalition in San Francisco, which organized both rallies. Two days after the first "Immigrant Day" on March 18, Gov. Wilson extended food stamp benefits through September, she said.

The demonstrators want full restoration of SSI and food stamp benefits for the elderly, prenatal and long-term care, and more state funds for citizenship classes. Welfare reform should not be made at the expense of the immigrant community, Saucedo contended, particularly when the state's coffers are full.

"The state has more than enough money to provide for all low-income residents," said Saucedo, citing the governor's revised budget which shows a \$2.3 billion increase in projected state revenues and \$1.1 billion in budget savings.

Many of the demonstrators coming from the Central Valley and the Sacramento area are originally from the highlands of Laos -- Hmong and Lu Mien -- and feel especially threatened by the cutoffs. Yee Xiong of the California Statewide Lao/Hmong Coalition said he gets dozens of phone calls every day from "people who are crying."

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"They don't know where to turn and how to express their concerns, since they can't speak the language," Xiong said. "They tell me, 'We have sacrificed our lives for the United States, and we need to be heard.' " Some have spoken of killing themselves and their families out of desperation, he said.

In March, Fong Cha, a Hmong from the Yolo County town of Willows, reportedly collapsed and died after receiving the notification that his benefits would be cut off. During the Vietnam war in Laos, Cha had rescued a downed American pilot, and his family was forced to leave their village and subsequently Laos because of his good deed.

Xiong said there have been Hmong suicides in Butte and Glenn counties and Stockton related to despair over the impending cutoff.

Many are Hmong war veterans, recruited by the CIA during the Vietnam war to fight in Indochina with pledges that the U.S. government would stand by them and take care of them.

"The state needs to watch out for the elderly, permanent legal residents who feel that this is another form of persecution -- as if they hadn't suffered enough in Laos," Xiong said.

There are about 160,000 Hmong in the United States.

In California, about 247,000 mostly aged, blind and disabled immigrants are projected to lose welfare benefits in August, and an additional 350,000 will lose food stamp eligibility, according to the office of Assembly Speaker Cruz Bustamante, D-Fresno.

But fewer actually may be affected. Earlier this month, the federal Department of Health and Human Services articulated the administration's definition of disabled as "unable to work." As a result, the Office of Budget and Management has estimated that two-thirds of the elderly immigrants will be able to requalify for SSI benefits.

Notes

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Graphic

Photo;

PHOTO: GARY REYES -- MERCURY NEWS

The Rev. John Freesemann of Holy Redeemer Lutheran Church in San Jose speaks Tuesday against welfare reform legislation at a prayer session at San Jose's St. Joseph Basilica.

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