

REFUGEES DECRY PLANNED WELFARE CUTOFF; LEGAL IMMIGRANTS FEAR FUTURE, CITIZENSHIP TEST

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Body

Using a mop handle for a cane and winded from the short walk to the microphone, Xia Pao Vang stood at a St. Paul community meeting on Saturday to voice a question that weighs heavily on the minds of thousands of elderly Hmong residents in Minnesota.

"What will become of me?" asked Vang, who turns 83 on April 4, three days after new **welfare** laws make him ineligible for federal Supplemental Security Income.

State legislators and officials from Ramsey County's Human Services Department attended the meeting at the McDonough Homes gymnasium to hear residents' concerns about federal **welfare** law changes.

Vang and the other residents who spoke at the meeting used an interpreter to communicate.

Under federal **welfare** laws that take effect throughout the year, **legal immigrants** who have lived in the United States for more than five years will be cut from the **welfare** rolls. State officials estimate the new law could result in the loss of benefits for up to 15,000 **legal immigrants**.

President Clinton in November said he would push to restore a portion of federal **welfare** funds for **legal immigrants** and children. Nonetheless, **fears** of losing meager incomes loom large in the Hmong and Cambodian communities in St. Paul.

More than anything, Vang and the other speakers expressed a strong desire to become U.S. citizens, a status that could make them eligible once again for federal benefits. But for many elderly people, learning enough English to pass the **citizenship test** is unlikely, most agree.

At this stage of his life, Vang told Sens. Ellen Anderson, DFL-St. Paul, and David Ten Eyck, DFL-Bemidji, he struggled to remember much of his own native language; he wondered whether the **citizenship test** could be waived.

As sympathetic as they are to the sensitive position of this group of residents, none of the state or county officials could make any promises, other than to share the stories they heard and carry the message to the state Capitol.

"Keep telling your stories," Ten Eyck urged residents. "They are compelling stories that need to be told."

So the meeting, sponsored by the McDonough Organization with Respect and Equity, focused on the compelling testimonials from people who **fear** the not-too-distant **future**.

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Many times during the three-hour meeting, speakers and people in the crowd broke down and wept as the immigrants' situations were described. More often than not, their frustration centered on their inability to retain enough information to pass the ***citizenship test***.

"I want to incorporate myself with the rest of the American people," said Nok Phong, 72. "How can I survive without passing the ***citizenship test***? I am going to die."

Va Yang said she sat home, consumed by the ***fear*** of losing her income.

"If you love old people like us, can you help us? We need your help," she said.

Richard Breitman, a Minneapolis immigration lawyer, said there is a limited range of special circumstances when portions of the ***citizenship test*** can be waived.

Typically, ***citizenship*** applicants are required to answer questions about written and spoken English and complete a civics section, Breitman said.

Sia Lo, a recent law school graduate and the son of Hmong immigrants, silenced the crowd when he spoke about the struggle of his people for freedom, their contributions to the United States in the Vietnam War and their flight from persecution in their homelands.

"We didn't come to this country to receive SSI. We came here because of a war, and because we wanted to be free," he said.

"We fought for you, we rescued your pilots, put our lives on the line. We only ask for food to eat so we can be a nation again," Lo said.

"Why would you take the food we need to live? Take our shelter. We have no place to go."

Expecting elderly people to learn English at this stage of their lives would be an impossible task, he said.

His own mother took the ***test*** seven times before she passed, Lo said.

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