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Director for Communications: Susan Baukhages; Editor/Designer: Valerie Anne Bost  
We welcome your feedback. Send your compliments, corrections, ideas, subscriptions and address updates:  
FYI Editor, LIRS, 700 Light Street, Baltimore MD 21230 | [fyi@lirs.org](mailto:fyi@lirs.org) | [www.lirs.org](http://www.lirs.org)

## From the President's Desk

### Rejoice Always! Give Thanks in All Circumstances!

*By Ralston Deffenbaugh, LIRS President*

**A**t the conclusion of his first letter to them St. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NRSV). As this year draws to a close we at LIRS have much to be thankful for in our work with refugees and migrants.

This is an exciting time for LIRS. Indeed, one could say that the agency is on the rebound following the post-September 11 shocks and the layoffs and belt-tightening of 2002. Our mission and strategic directions are clear, our programs are growing, our staffing level is almost back to where we were, and our financial situation is stable.

The number of refugees resettled in the United States rose significantly in fiscal year 2004, reaching a level of 52,868, compared with 28,455 the year before. LIRS resettled 8,637 in the fiscal year, with 1,745 coming in September alone. Our resettlement affiliates are very busy now! We're not yet back to the levels of the 1990s but we are grateful to help bring new hope and new life to so many refugees.

We have been able to significantly expand services for unaccompanied foreign-born children in federal custody through a partnership among LIRS, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement. We give thanks that children once held in juvenile detention facilities, even though they are not criminals, are now thriving in loving foster families or in wholesome group homes. It is marvelous to hear the stories about what these new services have meant for the children's lives.

So many other areas of our work are bearing fruit. Among them are services for victims of torture in foreign countries who are now in U.S. immigration detention; awareness-building within the church about the needs of migrants, and the special vulnerability of child victims of trafficking; technical and financial assistance to help sustain local agencies that help asylum seekers; best practices for enhancing refugee employment and self-sufficiency; grants to congregations who are reaching out to newcomers in their communities; and our bold and principled advocacy voice in Washington, D.C.

Politically, I was encouraged this year to see positive messages about immigration in the 9/11 Commission report and from both political party conventions. I give thanks that immigration was not a divisive issue in the presidential campaign. And within the Lutheran churches, it has been gratifying that both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod continue to celebrate their partnership with LIRS, urging each and every congregation to be involved in the wonderfully transforming ministry of welcoming refugees and immigrants.

*Continued on page 5*

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#### The LIRS Mission

In response to God's love in Christ, we welcome the stranger, bringing new hope and new life through ministries of service and justice



**LIRS**

LUTHERAN IMMIGRATION  
AND REFUGEE SERVICE

*A cooperative agency of the  
ELCA, LCMS and LELCA*

*for your input, insight, innovation, inspiration, information*

## LIRS in Action

### LIRS Ambassadors Circle Members Inspire Lutheran Congregations to Open Their Hearts and Doors to Welcome the Stranger

By Lauren Wendt, Program Associate for Organizational Capacity Building and Denise Peterson, Director for Congregational and Community Outreach

Many former refugees and immigrants now call the prairie of South Dakota and the coast of Washington home. Two members of the LIRS Ambassadors Circle, a group of trained volunteers who promote the agency's mission, have been working with LIRS affiliates Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota (LSSSD) and Lutheran Community Services Northwest (LCSN) to spread the word about opportunities for congregational involvement in this special ministry.

Ambassadors Pat Reichert of Hartford, S.D., and Sharon Daoura of Stanwood, Wash., share a belief in the ministry of welcoming the stranger and a willingness to work to kindle a similar fire in fellow Lutherans. Sharon staffs LIRS displays at so many church events that, she laughs, "People now come looking for me!"

With Pat's influence and organization, a recent South Dakota women's event rallied around the state's refugee ministry. Several churches collected school materials for refugee children while others sent postcards to Congress advocating for fair and just immigration laws. Pat's work with congregations is a continuous process: "You have to keep bringing the issue before them and hoping that God will open their hearts just a little bit to hear about the issue."



Reichert with LIRS backpacks filled by women at a recent Lutheran Women's Missionary League event with school supplies for refugee children

In both South Dakota and Washington congregational co-sponsorship of

refugees became a pressing need as refugee arrival rates increased this fall. Pat ignited the "One Church, One Family" campaign when she sent out 140 letters to area churches encouraging them to sponsor refugees through LSSSD. The fire is burning within congregations across Washington, too. Because of Sharon's influence, congregations filled hundreds of backpacks for refugee youth. Other congregations filled welcome boxes for refugees' new homes. Her recent initiative led church handwork groups to donate 10 percent of their quilts to LCSN. Since educating and inspiring others is not a one-time activity Sharon suggests presenting information to a congregation, recommending some specific activity that's appropriate for them, and then sticking with them as they carry out the work.

It can be intimidating at first, Pat admits, but LIRS and the affiliate office inspire and support ambassadors. "I like to tell congregations it is part of our Christian responsibility and in response to God's love, we need to go out and welcome the stranger. Everyone has something to share and we're supposed to share that. Here's an opportunity. Just start small...make a small goal."

While the goals start out small, the results are life changing for both the newcomer and the congregation. "It brings families together, it's a good thing to do as a couple, it's a good thing for older people...and a good witness to share your faith," Pat tells interested congregations. "It's a wonderful thing to become involved."

Sharon agrees. "I've spent my whole life preparing for what I'm doing right now," reflects Sharon. "This is my special call." A call to service and advocacy they hope many congregations will answer.

*If you would like more information on becoming an LIRS ambassador or on how your congregation can be involved with volunteer opportunities ministering to refugees and immigrants, please contact Denise Peterson at 410/230-2756 or [dpeterson@lirs.org](mailto:dpeterson@lirs.org).*

#### MORE ON THE WEB

Learn more about the LIRS Ambassadors Circle at [www.lirs.org/DonateServe/advocate/ambassadors](http://www.lirs.org/DonateServe/advocate/ambassadors). Visit Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota at [www/lsssd.org](http://www/lsssd.org) and Lutheran Community Services Northwest at [www.lcsnw.org](http://www.lcsnw.org).

## Best Practices: Who's Doing What Well

### Hmong Resettlement *Then*: Patience and Flexibility Turn Slow Start Into Strong Success

By Lynne Santangelo, Refugee Youth Transition Coordinator, Wausau School District, LIRS Regional Consultant with Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan 1984-1995

When LIRS began resettling Southeast Asian refugees in the mid-1970s Lutheran social service agencies asked local churches to sponsor specific families. But the agencies quickly discovered that this model, which had worked so well for European refugees after World War 2, was inadequate for Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam conflict.

The first refugees to arrive in our northern Wisconsin community, young Vietnamese men, invariably moved to warmer climates and more ethnically diverse parts of the country.

Then a few Hmong families began to arrive. Since they had been subsistence farmers before the war, it was thought they would be comfortable and more employable in small cities and farming communities. We grasped at any cultural information we could find. I remember studying a paper written by a missionary who had developed a way to write the Hmong language with Roman characters. Terms like *animist*, *slash and burn agriculture*, *tonal language* and *clan* seemed to indicate that we and our new neighbors would have little in common.

But apprehension over cultural differences was overcome by what we shared: a concern for family. The first Hmong person my congregation, First English Lutheran in Wausau, met was Pao Thao, who asked us in 1979 to sponsor his cousin's family, the Changs. Thus began my involvement with resettlement work.

We threw ourselves into preparations. But when the family arrived in January 1980, we soon found that many of the things we had so carefully planned were rather unimportant: Children should sleep with their parents, not in a bed that looks like a cage! We had worried that the apartment

would be cramped, but they used only part of it. Time, patience and a real desire on both sides to communicate finally led to a successful resettlement.

As church sponsors learned from refugees, voluntary and government agencies learned to adapt resettlement plans. The Hmong clan system is a powerful force. Families resettled far from relatives soon moved to join clan leaders, leaving disappointed churches behind. As refugees settled in, they took on the role of sponsoring new arrivals. By 1984, when I began working with LIRS affiliate Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, we had learned to place arriving Hmong only with relatives in established Hmong communities. By understanding the clan system, and using it as an asset in resettlement planning, we helped make Wausau a welcoming place where the Hmong wanted to stay and build their new lives. Now nearly 5,000 of our 35,000 residents are Hmong!

Many middle-sized communities in Wisconsin struggled to accommodate their first large group of non-English speaking immigrants in many decades and their first significant racial minority ever. It didn't make things easier that jobs were very scarce during the 1980s and early '90s when the largest numbers of Hmong arrived. The tension began to ease as Hmong employment soared with the economy. Home ownership, college education and citizenship rates grew rapidly. Despite the challenges we all faced, the process succeeded, and so did the Hmong!

Santangelo, left, and her mother-in-law, center, snap beans with members of the Chang family, from left, Yer Thao, Mao Vang and Sia Fong



## Best Practices: Who's Doing What Well

### Hmong Resettlement Now: A Model of Partnerships Plans for Comprehensive Services

By Susan Gundlach, Director of Refugee and Immigrant Services for Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan

Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan (LSS) is thrilled to see Wausau, Wis., a major hub of Hmong resettlement activity once again. Over 16,000 Hmong refugees currently living at Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand were recently identified for resettlement in the United States. Because LSS was the resettlement agency in Wausau in the 1970s and '80s, we expected that the city's more than 4,700 Hmong residents would have relatives in Thailand who would want to join them. Little did we know how many that might be!

We began the process of opening a suboffice, and mobilized the local communities and the Hmong population. Through the hard work of LSS staff and Lynne Santangelo, a key volunteer with LSS resettlement experience (See article on page 3), we filed interests on behalf of 754 refugees.

We were thrilled by the larger community's response to a new wave of Hmong refugees. It was wonderful to hear comments such as, "We did it before, we can do it again!" and, "We didn't always do the best job we could have 25 years ago. Let's get it right this time!" and, "This isn't going to be easy, but it is important." Service providers were eager to learn about the incoming Hmong refugees and how their needs might differ from their relatives who were resettled in the 1970s and '80s. People wanted to make sure they did everything that they could to have appropriate services in place.

Blia Xiong, a single mother, arrived in Wausau September 22 with her two sons and two daughters, aged 1–13. At the airport to meet Blia were her brother, Kong Ying Xiong, whom she last saw when she was 13, and at least 25 other

relatives. It was an emotional reunion full of sobs of joy and long hugs for everyone. Because Kong was married, his family traveled here 24 years ago, but he had to leave his sister behind with their aunt and uncle, who had been their caretakers after the early death of their parents. Amid tears of joy Blia said, "Now that I am with my brother I don't need to worry anymore, and my greatest wish—to see him again—has finally come true!"



The Xiong family reunites at Central Wisconsin Airport

A well-prepared community and dedicated staff have made Blia's dream of seeing her brother a reality. She and her children have a safe place to live—in a supportive community that is well informed about her needs.

This would not have been possible without community meetings to help people understand why refugees such as Blia needed to come to Wausau and what the community could do to prepare for these families. Wausau took this planning one step further by forming groups that could work to prepare for various areas of service such as housing, public health, mental health, employment and donations. Enlisting the support of the Wausau Area Hmong

Mutual Assistance Association was also key in helping to ensure that comprehensive services would be available. Everyone's efforts have led to a resettlement model of partnerships that plan to work together beyond the initial "honeymoon period" and well into the future.

#### MORE ON THE WEB

Visit Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan online at [www.lsswis.org](http://www.lsswis.org).

## Network News

Sister Liliame Alam, FMM, executive director for LIRS Asylum and Immigration Grant recipient Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, El Paso, received the Mexican American Bar Association's presidential award for community service September 25. The award recognizes a nonattorney who has made exemplary contributions to the community through public service and honors Alam's "inspiring and humbling" work on behalf of immigrants.

New members of the LIRS Ambassadors Circle are Kholoud Khoury of Mount Prospect, Ill., and Lyle Otte of Decorah, Iowa.

LIRS affiliate Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries, headquartered in Mechanicsburg, Pa., with a suboffice in Baltimore, has announced the closing of its refugee and immigration service program effective March 31, 2005. Increased financial challenges prompted the decision. LIRS is grateful for the more than 30 years' service Diakon, formerly Tressler Lutheran Services, provided to refugees and immigrants, and is actively exploring ways to maintain a presence for local refugee resettlement in the Baltimore area.

On September 20 we marked the fifth anniversary of our opening the doors of the Lutheran Center in Baltimore. I thanked the staff that day for helping to make this building such a nice place to work, and for their role in carrying out the great work of service that flows from this place. I want to thank you, our readers and supporters, as well. Through thick and thin, this has indeed been a place from which new hope and new life have been brought. We are blessed to be a blessing. Thanks be to God!

## LIRS in the News

A letter to the editor from LIRS President Ralston Deffenbaugh appeared in the September 16 Washington Times in support of Assistant Secretary of State Arthur E. Dewey's condemnation of refugee warehousing. Deffenbaugh mentioned several refugee groups in need of special attention, including 100,000 Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.

The Philadelphia Inquirer quoted Deffenbaugh in a September 23 article "A Home in America," which chronicles a group of Meskhetian Turk refugees' journey from the Black Sea to the United States.

LIRS Team Leader for Policy and Advocacy Matt Wilch was quoted in U.S. Newswire's September 27 release "Mentally Challenged Teenager from Guinea to Take Stand in Asylum Hearing Tomorrow; Matthew Wilch of LIRS Reacts," which covered his perspective on the Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act.

The October 2004 issue of Worldscan, an online publication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, mentioned LIRS and quoted Deffenbaugh as recommending asylum for Rodi Alvarado and other women with gender-based asylum claims.

LIFE magazine's October 1 edition included a six-page article and photo spread, "Packing for America," which investigated the lives of immigrants from their suitcases' perspective. The article cites LIRS as an agency of newcomer resources and education.

In an article titled "County Cashes in with Inmates" the Baltimore Sun's October 17 edition cited LIRS as its source for information on deportation proceedings and detainee costs.

## Washington Update Seeking New Hope and New Life in the 109th Congress

*By Lynette Engelhardt Stott, LIRS Director for Government Relations*

The 109th Congress will convene on January 3, 2005. Republicans added members in both the House and Senate, but the margins continue to be slim—meaning bipartisanship remains key for legislation to pass. However, bipartisanship in the 109th will likely be even more difficult to achieve than it was in the 108th. Moderate Democrats in the Senate were replaced with conservative Republicans, meaning the 109th Senate becomes a more ideologically polarized body like the House. And the November elections continued the trend toward a more conservative House.

Senate Republicans in the 109th will also increase their ratio on all committees, giving them further control of legislation that comes to the floor.

The 109th Congress will include 18 Lutherans, five fewer than before. None of the new members of Congress is currently Lutheran, but Representative-Elect Reichert (R-WA) was raised in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The Bipartisan Congressional Refugee Caucus lost four members through retirement or defeat. We are hopeful that more members will join to strengthen the caucus. If your representatives are not already members, visit [www.lirs.org](http://www.lirs.org) for a sample letter asking them to join.

The Senate gained a former refugee as a member. Senator-Elect Mel Martinez (R-FL) came to the United States as an unaccompanied refugee minor from Cuba.

We expect funding for refugee programs to continue to be scarce in 2005. Our first indication of funding levels will come when President Bush releases his fiscal year 2006 budget proposal—likely on February 7.

The November elections brought a renewed focus on moral values. According to a CNN exit poll, 22 percent of voters identified the most important issue in the election as "moral values." It is now incumbent upon us to ensure that the needs of refugees and immigrants are seen and embraced as moral values. The Bible is clear on our responsibility toward the non-citizen: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19: 33-34).

There's no better time than the present to begin developing or nurturing your relationship with your elected officials. I encourage you to write letters to your senators and representative now. Congratulate those who are newly elected and urge all members to give high priority in the 109th Congress to the needs of refugees and other immigrants.

In the next issue of FYI we will introduce LIRS's legislative priorities for the 109th Congress. As with every new legislative season, we will have our work cut out for us: speaking up boldly for fair and just policies. We are grateful to you who stand beside us in this work and make your voices heard on behalf of the most vulnerable!



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10 Years Ago in FYI—65,000 Somalis opted to return home when six Kenyan refugee camps closed. (*December 1994*)

5 Years Ago in FYI—LIRS partners with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to give their first joint Asylum and Immigration grants. (*December 1999*)

## Staff News

Emily Butera joined the organizational capacity building unit as senior consultant for organizational development September 20.

Several changes in the resettlement unit reflect ongoing restructuring there. Christine Gedim, case processing assistant since May 2002, was promoted to placement coordinator in the resettlement unit effective October 1. On October 11 Irene Amoros started as resettlement assistant. Suzanne Paszly, who has been with LIRS since November 1999, most recently as senior assistant director for reception and placement, will have increased coordination and supervisory responsibilities for post-arrival refugee resettlement functions effective November 9. Amanual Estefou, with the agency since April 2002, has been promoted to senior assistant director for case processing and WRAPS database management, with supervisory

responsibility over the case processing staff, also effective November 9.

Telly McGaha, grants manager in the Finance and Administration Department since January, left October 15.

On October 15 we also said farewell to Kerry McCarthy, program coordinator for Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) since December 2000.

Kaela Volkmer came on board October 18 as a child specialist in the children's services unit.

The human resources department welcomed Elizabeth Finn as part-time clerical assistant starting October 27.

LIRS's new staff attorney, Carol Pelton, started November 8 in the access to justice unit.

Bertram Pereira, director for finance since October 2003, left November 15.

## *In Lieu of Flowers...*

May Y. Wong and her family fled China in 1959. After spending some time in Hong Kong, she was resettled to the U.S. through the Refugee Relief Act under the Eisenhower administration. LIRS was there to welcome her, providing resettlement support to her and her family. Mrs. Wong passed away this year in January. In a letter to LIRS Her son stated that his mother "has always been thankful to be at the receiving end of such a service and it is the family's wish to honor her memory by requesting that all charitable donations be made to your organization and the great work it is performing." In the weeks to follow, her family and friends contributed over \$2,500.00 to LIRS. Memorial donations to charitable organizations such as LIRS are a legacy of your loved one's values.