
Project Update: Mutual Adaptation between Karen Refugees and a Rural Minnesota Community

by Barbara Stone



Photo courtesy of Barbara Stone

According to the Refugee Resettlement Programs Office at the Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2,993 refugees from Burma arrived in Minnesota between October 1998 and September 2010. Many of these refugees are Karen, a minority ethnic group from Burma's eastern border along Thailand (Figure 1). A substantial number of Karen refugees in the United States have settled in St. Paul, which has the largest community of Karen outside of Asia. However, a combination of limited English proficiency and a highly competitive job market has made it difficult for Karen refugees to find full-time work in St. Paul. In December 2007, Lifetrack Resources—a nonprofit human services

organization that provides education, therapeutic, and employment services to families and individuals—began helping Karen refugees relocate to Worthington, Minnesota, where they could find more stable employment opportunities.

With support from Lifetrack Resources and a Communiiversity grant from CURA, I was hired in 2010 to identify key relocation success factors for the Karen in Worthington. Lifetrack staff and Karen community leaders helped me to identify Karen refugees whom Lifetrack had assisted with their relocation. I then conducted in-depth interviews with these refugees in their homes to ascertain how successful they considered their relocation to be, as well as what factors impacted this success. I

also worked with Lifetrack to identify civic, business, education, social-service, and faith-community leaders who I then interviewed about their perceptions as to why this relocation was successful.

Based on these interviews, I identified the important factors contributing to successful resettlement outcomes in Worthington for the Karen. First, Nobles County (where Worthington is located) already had a diverse population. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the county is the fifth most ethnically diverse of Minnesota's 87 counties, with residents who represent 36 countries and speak 56 different languages. Community leaders reported that because of this history of diversity, a supportive infrastructure already existed

in Worthington at the time the Karen began arriving, including bilingual outreach and interpretation/translation services, as well as classes on driving, car care, household management, the English language, the legal system, and home buying. These programs were readily adaptable to meet the needs of the Karen.

Furthermore, Worthington community leaders reported that they made conscious decisions to provide leadership by making a stand for diversity and modeling welcoming behaviors. In 2008, the city held a welcome event attended by hundreds of people to mutually introduce the Karen and Worthington communities.

Another important success factor identified by community leaders was the perception that the Karen people were generous, compassionate, and had a strong work ethic. Openness to mutual learning among both the Karen and established Worthington communities also helped foster success.

Based on this analysis, it may be helpful for service providers to consider the following factors when evaluating a community's ability to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for refugee resettlement:

- ▶ previous positive experience or comfort with diversity
- ▶ available infrastructure that supports new immigrants
- ▶ flexibility in shifting between worldviews and demonstrating culturally appropriate behaviors
- ▶ interest in and a willingness to experience other cultures and values
- ▶ extraordinary commitment of community leaders to help new immigrants succeed

The resettlement of the Karen in Worthington is a relocation success story. The lessons learned from this research regarding mutual adaptation¹ between the Karen and Worthington residents can be used to help create smoother transitions as refugees settle in other diverse rural and urban communities in Minnesota.

Barbara Stone is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. Her research

¹ J.W. Berry, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation," *Applied Psychology* 46,1 (1997): 5-34.

Figure 1. Location of the Karen State



interests include cultural adjustment and mutual adaptation. She was a graduate research assistant with CURA at the time this research was conducted.

The research on which this article is based was supported in part through a grant from CURA's Commuiversity program, which provides graduate student research assistance to community-based nonprofit organizations and government agencies on a specific project. Priority is given to groups serving diverse

communities. Additional funding for this project was provided by Lifetrack Resources.

This article is a summary of two research projects conducted in 2010 and 2011. The full reports on these projects can be found at www.cura.umn.edu/publications/catalog/cm-v-028 and www.cura.umn.edu/publications/catalog/cm-v-034.