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Excerpts and Summary of the 56th Community Hunger and Nutrition Forum

Wednesday, July 13, 2005 12:00PM –1:30PM

Trinity Lutheran Church, Fresno

Sponsored by Fresno Metro Ministry

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MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

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Community Alliance with Family Farmers

FOCUS – *Senior Nutrition / Elder Hunger*

Compiled by Carey Berend and Jeremy Hofer

Hunger and Nutrition Forum

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

Jeremy Hofer: This is the 56th consecutive Hunger and Nutrition Forum, which is pretty impressive considering that's four years running that we've been bringing together people around nutrition and hunger issues, and problem solving with you all, so thank you for coming today.

Today's topic, as all of you probably know, is senior nutrition, elder hunger. Metro has been convening a taskforce has dealt with Senior Nutrition issues. We haven't met regularly recently, but we would like to consider reforming this task group to solve some of the problems that exist and to further network our organizations that are working on issues of senior nutrition, hunger, and access to food.

FRESNO/CLOVIS CROP WALK

Sunday, October 16 - 2:30pm

Refreshments starting at 1pm

- leaving from the Westside Church of God (1422 W California Ave Fresno).

For more info: 431-8193 / 435-7439

Al Evans: This is one of the major events in the local area bringing people together from all across the community addressing this problem of hunger that is highlighted so effectively by these hunger forums. **Of all the money that is raised by the CROP Walk, 25 percent stays locally and it goes to the Community Food Bank, and I hope you know that every year over one million times somebody gets a box or a bag of food**

from the Community Food Bank through one of its 200 partner organizations. That's just the Fresno/Clovis area. One million bags of food. That is something that's moving. Seventy-five percent of the funds that are raised by the CROP Walk go to address needs worldwide. They go to Church World Service and about 20 partner organizations. This is a major interfaith event. Some of the funds if they're designated go to Presbyterian organizations, some go to National Organization of Evangelicals, some go to Catholic Relief Services, some go to a Lutheran organization, Jewish, Muslim also, so **this is a genuine interfaith event.** The house church will be Westside Church of God. It will be going along Kearney Boulevard. It will be a party atmosphere in advance. I encourage you to be there by 1 o'clock or before because there will be food, there will be wonderful music by Men of Promise and other groups, and it's going to be a terrific community celebration. **Our recruiter orientation meeting is coming up Sunday, August 21** at the same church, so if your church or other house of worship or other organization – it doesn't have to be a religious organization – if you

June 8, 2005

are interested in taking part in this it's easy to do, it's fun, and it fills our need to come together and act on the basis of compassion.

RANETTA HELMS IS A REGISTERED DIETITIAN WITH THE FRESNO/MADERA AGENCY ON AGING WHICH HAS SEVERAL PROGRAMS THAT SERVING SENIORS.

Ranetta Helms: Our agency has a lot of programs of outreach, case management, and programs like that, but I'm just involved in the nutrition because you've got to feed people, right? We think that's the most important thing. Basically, our organization has two main programs. Our **Congregate Meals Program has senior meal sites throughout Fresno and Madera Counties**, and we also have a **Homebound Meals Program**. We also have a **Senior Farmers Market Project**, which I'll talk about a little later, but our main two programs are the Congregate Meals Program and the Homebound Meals Program. The **Congregate Meal Program actually has 41 meals sites throughout Fresno and Madera Counties, city sites, rural sites, all over. Anyone who is 60 and over is welcome to go to one of those meal sites.** The menu is approved by me, so it's good, and it includes one-third of what a senior would need each day, so they're getting a healthy, balanced meal, as good as we can do cost-wise, to feed 1000 seniors per day in Fresno and Madera Counties. There is no charge for the meals, but we do accept donations. We try to keep that as confidential as possible. Some of our meal sites have activities, others don't. All that's required is that the senior does call a day in advance or is at the site the day before to let the coordinator know that they're coming. I believe you have a meal site list in your packet. It will tell where all the meal sites are. We do have a regular menu. **We also offer a salad choice menu during the summer months, and we also have our menus available now finally in Spanish, so if they want to call our agency, we do have Spanish menus available.** We do serve some Asian meal sites, and unfortunately we give them rice once a week. We used to give more of an Asian menu, but we're still kind of working and refining that process. **We do not check for income requirement or anything like that at our congregated meal sites, so they're really open to everyone.** I don't know whether a lot of people aren't aware of the program or what the reason would be why we don't have greater attendance, but they're open to all seniors who are hungry and want a good meal and want some socialization. If we just encourage people to jump in, they're going to feel accepted and enjoy that.

We also have our **Homebound Meals Program. We have about 1000 people throughout Fresno and Madera Counties on this program** also. This program is available throughout Fresno and Madera Counties, even in the rural areas. We do have a little stricter requirements for this program. They must be 60 or older and they must be homebound. Homebound can be a little gray area, but basically it means that **they don't drive or shouldn't be driving and that they are not able to shop for themselves and/or prepare food for themselves. Again, they can call our agency and we will refer them to a number that will take an application for them**, and then as quickly as possible, usually within a few weeks, someone from our agency will go out into the home and see if they qualify. Like I said, it's pretty simple. It is for homebound seniors. We also look at family support. If they have a child that lives with them and is able to care for them we like to save the program for someone more needy, but if they aren't able to get out or make their own meals and they don't have a lot of family support then this is a great program. Again, there's not charge for the program, but we do accept donations because the more donations we get, the more we can do, but it's very confidential. There's not a checklist or anything like that as far as the donations. I have copies of these different menus. The people on our Homebound Program in Fresno receive one delivery a week. They get a frozen meal and along with that delivery they also get items for breakfast, so they really get two bags per week. It's a lot of food. They're getting about two-thirds of what they need every day for seven days a week. There's a hot meal that they can heat up, a dessert item, juice, milk, bread, butter once in a while, and cereals. It's a really great program, and we do have quite a bit of requests for that program, but we don't have a waiting list currently. We're able to add everybody at this time that

June 8, 2005

qualifies. In Madera the program is a little different. I don't know if you serve in Madera a lot, but the program there is actually one hot meal a day five days a week, kind of the old fashioned program.

One other thing we've been working on during this summer is the **Farm Market Project**. That's one of my favorites. I like doing that because I'm a dietitian and I like the idea of getting seniors to eat fruits and vegetables. **We had about 1000 coupons that we were able to distribute this year.** This is a grant that comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, so seniors that would qualify would receive a booklet with \$20 worth of coupons and they were able to go to one of the locally approved farm markets and redeem those. **We did have an income limitation this year, which was not really a low income. It was about \$1400 a month individually and about \$1900 a month per couple. We distributed a lot of these at our meal sites.** They certainly weren't limited to the people that attended our meal sites. People from the community would go to the meal sites to pick up coupons. I had a lot of people call me personally at our agency and they would come in and pick up coupons. I went actually to one of the farm markets yesterday and gave out some coupons to the people who were already there. That was kind of fun, except it was hot. Also, **we did some produce deliveries to FIRM and Romaine and Fresno Learning. For some of the groups that had a harder time getting out to the markets we brought the produce to them.** We also gave some to the Valley Center for the Blind to some of the lower income people there. If we were able to get more coupons through this program I think we could meet the needs of a lot more seniors, but we do get a really limited amount so I try to give them out where I can to people who are needy and I know will use them.

Jeremy Hofer: Can you talk about what you're doing with one of your sites that's primarily serving the Japanese population and what they've done and then the potential of doing that with other ethnic groups with the restaurants?

Ranetta Helms: That's a good question. I said we were limited in what we can do, but there are things we can do outside of the box, too. We have a meal site in the **Kaye Center** actually over on I think it's like Kern and E, kind of in that area, and they actually receive their meals from a restaurant. They have a restaurant that prepares Japanese food for them and that's what they get every day. This is not really uncommon. They do it a lot up in the Bay Area and different areas. The **Kaye Center** is fairly financially stable in themselves, so they're able to supplement the restaurant over what our agency pays. We have actually looked into this possibility with FIRM, and it's difficult to find a restaurant that is willing to take on that responsibility for what our agency is able to reimburse counting delivery and all of that, but this is a possibility and our agency would actually love to open more meal sites through restaurants. There are even places in the country that give seniors a coupon and they can go to Wendy's or other restaurants that have an approved meal, so a dietitian would look and say, you know, you can order the salad, the small hamburger, and the baked potato and this will be your RDA or whatever, and they can do that, so these are things that we have looked at as an agency. I don't know what you people think. We thought it was a great idea, but we found out that a lot of seniors love their little senior site and they don't want to get away from there. It's like their second home. They have a pride, it's kind of a feeling of ownership, so we've looked into this idea with maybe a new site that's opening. We haven't been able to find an appropriate site with an appropriate restaurant and pull it all together, but we're still looking.

Reverend Sharon Stanley: I want to thank you for the ways that we've worked at having our site be somewhat Asianized in its meal because the ones who eat are primarily Southeast Asian. **I'm excited to hear you talk about the possibility of looking at having elders go to a local restaurant if the menu is approved, and that, as you said, cuts out the complexity of needing to figure even delivery costs into the overall payment that a restaurant would have to provide if they were bringing the food to the meal site. Would it have to be for lunch?**

June 8, 2005

Ranetta Helms: Not necessarily. If we gave the coupons like that they could go anytime the restaurant was open, actually. Our limitations don't say that it has to be breakfast or lunch or dinner.

Reverend Sharon Stanley: I'm thinking elders who may come for social reasons to another site during the daytime may very much want to access the coupon for an evening meal.

Ranetta Helms: Right. It's something that we've looked at, and I would like the feedback from the community if you feel that's something the seniors that you work with would be interested in. You might lose some of the socialization, but then again, they might go in groups, so we can look into that more.

Jeremy Hofer: This is something we talked about at the last senior nutrition meeting. That's why I asked the question, and I hope that we can revisit this at a taskforce meeting maybe in a couple months.

PHOUA MOUA WORKED WITH FRESNO METRO MINISTRY ON THE HUNGER & NUTRITION PROJECT SINCE 2002. SHE IS LEAVING METRO IN JULY TO PREPARE FOR LAW SCHOOL.

Phoua Moua: Upon leaving Metro I promised Edie that I would do this presentation on SSI and food stamps in California and in hopes to answer questions on why elders on SSI in California are not eligible for food stamps. There are many components to SSI that I will not mention in my presentation. I'm trying to just focus on the food stamp part of it. This presentation is really an attempt to simplify what I know and what I've researched about the issue. A lot of the things that I've gotten are from the 2003 report that California Food Policy Advocates came out with Mathematica called "**Cashout in California: A History of Help and Harm**", and this was an analysis of California's food stamp cashout policy for their SSI recipients. At the same time they also came out with a paper that looked at hunger among seniors called "**Preventing Hunger Among Elderly Californians**", and at the end of my presentation I'll let you know where you can get copies of these reports. Before I start, I wanted to just say I'm glad Fresno County ETA is here and that Social Security Administration is here as backups to help me answer questions.

I'm going to start with what is SSI? **SSI, or Supplemental Security Income, is a federal program that provides monthly cash payments to people in need, and it's for people 65 or older as well as blind or disabled people of any age including children. What SSI is not is Social Security.** This is where most people get confused with the issue of Social Security and SSI. The main difference is that **SSI is based on the need and Social Security is based on what a person accrued from past employment and resources.** In some cases, some people can get both SSI and Social Security. How many people actually get SSI in California, anyway? As of 2004 data in the Social Security annual report, over a million in California and increasing, and then the breakdown for California for age, blind, disabled adults, and disabled children. I want to have you guys keep these numbers in mind as I go throughout the program.

To understand SSI in California you have to understand the payment parts. SSI equals federal payment, and this is the money that is across the board for all states, and this increases yearly based on federal cost of living adjustments. **In California the SSP part of the payments is the state supplemental payments,** which are supplements that are optional for states to help meet the needs of their residents that are not met by federal SSI payments. Not all states do SSP payments. **California is actually one of the states that has the highest SSP payments.** Of course, states determine the categories of people and the amount they will supplement as their SSP payment.

June 8, 2005

When I talk about SSI as a whole for California I am talking about it as SSI and SSP payments together.

What does this look like in a dollar amount per month? These are recent 2005 numbers as of March or April. As you know, California has many categories like 'blind' and 'disabled' which adjusts the total SSI payment. I'm just looking at individuals and couples that are considered independent living status, so they both live in a house that has cooking facilities and things like that. **As of right now, individuals with the SSI/SSP payments get \$812 a month and couples get \$1,437.** Again, I just want to highlight that California is one of the highest SSP compared to other states. It's only second next to Alaska, I believe.

I'm going to switch gears to food stamps. Many of you are probably aware of this, but I just want to recap. Food stamps are basically a federal food assistance program that provides crucial support to needy households and to those making the transition from welfare to work. **We like to look at the Food Stamp Program as the first line of defense against hunger because it's also one of the most dependable sources of income for food versus emergency food from the food banks.** Food Stamps enables low-income families to buy nutritious food with their EBT card - called the Golden State Advantage Card. We no longer have actual coupons here in California.

This next table is really my attempt to look at SSI and food stamps as federal public assistant programs, which really doesn't make sense because they're administered by different departments in the U.S. Just looking at funding again, SSI and food stamps are federal and have some state administration to it. Our County Employment and Temporary Assistance administers the Food Stamp Program here in the county. The income eligibility for SSI looks at individuals and couples while food stamps looks at households, which complicates making comparisons between the two programs.

Now that some of the background information is done, I am going to try to get to the meat of the issue. **Why can't people on SSI get food stamps in California? This is because of this policy called cashout. In 1974 – SSI became a program and states were allowed to increase their optional SSP payments in lieu of food stamps,** and this is what California chose to do. So instead of offering food stamps for their SSI recipients, **California decided to add ten dollars cash to the SSP payment in place of food stamps.** This was to save state costs associated with administering food stamps. Again, administration of food stamps comes down to the state and then the county. Okay, so now you're all asking me, what's the big deal? They get cash, right? Ten dollars in cash. So they should be more flexible in how they use their payments to get food, right? So what happened? Around the 80s, a decade later, the ten dollars kind of goes away, but California fought really hard to get exemptions to allow this rule to continue because of the high cost of administering food stamps to SSI recipients. Congress allowed many special exemptions to California. One of the most recent provisions is that California can have cashout as long as it passes through federal cost of living increases to the SSI portion of the grant. What does this mean? This means that each year the federal government increased SSI to compensate the loss of value due to inflation, and what has happened is California hasn't really kept up with it because that's what they're supposed to do with the SSP payments but they didn't. In the end, California was allowed to keep doing cashout as long as they meet certain kinds of spending requirements for their SSP.

What does this look like in numbers? As long as California's SSP amount is at least \$156, which is the amount of SSP for California in March of 1983, it meets the federal requirements, so as long as they keep their SSP amount to \$156 they're okay. This means the State doesn't have to increase the SSP to meet what the feds are doing. I just wanted, again, to remind everyone that SSP amounts and the criteria are optional for states and up to the state, and of course, there are also many more details in the CFA reports on this and more details on this current provision.

June 8, 2005

[SLIDE] The red line here is the SSI level needed to maintain real value of SSI over time, so this red line is what the fed is supposed to maintain. The blue line is what California is supposed to maintain if they kept going and not getting that pass through that they got. The actual numbers are in the bars, so the white bars are the feds and the black bars are California. Can you all see the issue? If California didn't get the kind of provisions and exemptions that they've gotten it supposedly has to increase its SSP, but because they were able to get it they're allowed to just remain at the same amount and not increase SSP, which is higher than the federal requirement of \$156 set in 1983. So this is what it looks like in a graph. The key point here is that while the feds are increasing the SSI amount each year to keep up with cost of living, California is not.

The next few slides are my math challenge. I'm not a really good mathematician and I didn't like math growing up, but I'm going to make an attempt. I'm going to first of all show you our current food stamp payment chart, which I'm using as a point of reference. It shows the number of people in the households and then the maximum gross monthly income that people can have in each household with that amount of people and then the maximum dollar amount of food stamp benefit that they can get. Here's another chart: It's my attempt to outline what cashout looks like if it ended. Would SSI recipients be eligible for food stamps? I was just looking at singles and couples, again, keeping it simple. For household size single would be one, couple would be two, and with independent living conditions. **Let's say right now they get the maximum SSI income for 2005, \$812, and the maximum amount that a single person can get for food stamps is \$1,009, so this would mean that they would qualify for food stamps if cashout was ended. For couples the difference is much tighter – only \$83, because of the complexity of the issue and because the difference is kind of low, there may be variations where some couples may qualify and some may not. The bottom line is cashout policy hurts single SSI recipients and it's kind of neutral with couples.**

Keep in mind that there are other categories than single and couple, and I want to go ahead and highlight those. What about households? I'm going to let you look at my pretend family, the Smith family. This is with cashout policy, which is the current law now, for a family of four with an SSI child in the household. Right now if they get a total of \$1500 as their gross income for three, again, looking back at the chart, and then their child that's on SSI would get \$812 but because of current law and that child doesn't qualify for food stamps that doesn't count, so that's why they're only counted as a household of three. That means that family would only get \$1500 and the food stamp limit for three is \$1,698 and this family then qualifies for food stamps and is eligible. Now, what does it look like without the cashout policy? If we change this and SSI recipients are allowed to have food stamps, what this looks like for the Smith family is that they have to count all four members of their household including their child on SSI, so that means their income adds up to \$2,312 and the food stamp limit is \$2,043, which is over the income limit for food stamps by \$269, so this family then no longer qualifies for food stamps. **So getting rid of cashout may harm households with SSI children.**

One of the things that I promised Edie that I would do, because Wisconsin was the last state that changed over to take out their cashout policy, this is kind of my brief look at Wisconsin. **Wisconsin is the most recent state to change cashout policy.** Keep in mind that their state administers their SSI, not the federal government like California. However, what they've done for SSI recipients that want to get food stamps is assign the administration of this to the Federal Social Security Administration that administers this for their SSI recipients along with all of the healthcare things for their Wisconsin SSI recipients, so that's a major difference. People on SSI really just get \$10 or a little more.

I'm going to do a quick recap about why it's so complicated. There's a high state cost to administrating food stamps for just SSI because we have over one million people. Everybody knows our state budget is in a crunch, and this is another one of the complications. Another complication is that it harms families with SSI recipients in the household for food stamp eligibility. If that household

June 8, 2005

was already getting food stamps, adding a child that has SSI or a person that has SSI in that household would put that family over their income limit and that family would no longer get food stamps. The other thing that California pays a lot of SSP (2nd in the country) even though they don't accrue at the same rate as the federal government. They actually could not increase it at all and just pay the \$156, but they don't. They add more to it along with other programs. Then another thing to look at is in California we do have the highest number of SSI recipients probably because we have a high population here in California, this makes administration complicated. On top of all these complications is the fact that our politics and legislation in California is very complicated as it is going through so many levels of government to administer many of our programs.

Before I go into any kind of potential solutions I also wanted to state that with all these complications I didn't even mention healthcare and Medicaid and the effects on SSI for Californians with and without cashout, and that's a huge federal regulation that's across the board just dealing with healthcare and people with SSI. I didn't even touch on that, and those regulations definitely do affect the decisions that California makes for cashout rules.

Fresno County Food Stamp Advocates

August 25th – 1:30pm

"Come to Fresno Metro Ministry's food stamp advocacy meeting in August for more discussion. I specifically put this in because at the last food stamp meeting **Julie Hornback** promised to do a budget that would look at food stamps and SSI and all the issues and complexity with the budget and why it would help and harm them." -Phoua Moua

What are some potential solutions? Some advocates throughout the states, as we've been hearing, said, well, we can change the federal rule. Just take the ten dollars out of the California rule and add that ten dollars as food stamps and let's not think about the households. That's an option, so we're helping seniors and elders, right? And then there's this other one that I've heard, which is a special category. Why don't we separate the families with SSI in the household but keep the same kind of rules for individuals and couples? So we're kind of carving them out and this rule wouldn't apply to them, so then that would help. The other thing was why doesn't California just keep increasing their SSP with the cashout policy but keep increasing it just at the level like they're supposed to like the feds have been doing. That would certainly help. I know a lot of SSI recipients would be very happy with that rule even if they didn't get food stamps because, as we know, our seniors are in need. Then this is my idea. I would invite everybody to come to that. You have this handout, but I wanted to just highlight this because I thought it was kind of funny when I was looking through it. This is from the Social Security Administration regarding California food stamps and SSI. The one that's funny to me is you can still get food stamps if you're waiting for your application or if your application is denied or if you move to another state. If you want more information, contact your local county office and then you have the resources that I've used, California Food Policy Advocates, California Department of Social Services, FRAC, which is the national Food Research and Action Center, Fresno Metro Ministry's website, this is recorded so you will get these notes on our website, Fresno County ETA has food stamp information, Social Security Administration has a huge online website with lots of information, and of course, USDA Food and Nutrition Services. Thank you.

Jeremy Hofer: We had better move on because we have some very special guests here. If there are a couple questions maybe we can ask now. We will follow this up at the next food stamp advocates taskforce meeting, which will feature the county. Julie will be featured at this next meeting, and it will be great to hear from you guys about your perspective and side of things.

FRESNO INTERDENOMINATIONAL REFUGEE MINISTRIES ALONG WITH HMONG, LAO AND SLAVIC ELDERS IS TRAVELING TO WASHINGTON D.C. TO MEET

June 8, 2005

WITH REPRESENTATIVES AND SENATORS ON THIS ISSUE OF THE SEVEN-YEAR TIME LIMIT FOR SSI FOR DISABLED AND ELDERLY REFUGEES.

Sharon Stanley: Thank you, Phoua. You don't have to apologize to us. I think all of us just feel like we're awfully glad we didn't have to try to make that presentation and keep it all straight. You've just heard about realities of food stamps, and one thing that is important to undergird is we're going to shift the focus to a specific look at refugee elder benefits. Refugee elders are not able to receive food stamps, and so already elders are at that disadvantage for not being eligible in addition. Just to highlight several statistics as our elders are coming up, Southeast Asian elder populations are those with the least benefits and those with the least income of any other refugee category in the entire country. If we're talking about refugee elders in California just who are Southeast Asian, to set the context that includes about 80,000 refugee elders. In terms of per capita income, it's important to remember as we're looking at issues that hit elders in a primary and exaggerated way, that even among all other Southeast Asian groups of any age in California it is Hmong refugees who have per capita income that is less than any other defined population within the state, and the per capita income for Hmong-Americans – again, this is across the board. This isn't even just for elders – is \$5,286 per person. Against that background, then, those who are elders among Southeast Asian refugee populations also have the very highest level of inability to speak English well. **As an example, of those who are from Cambodian population, 82 percent report speaking little to no English, and for 83.3 percent of Hmong it's the same thing as well as 79 percent of Lao.** So again, you're compounding the economic hardship, the inaccessibility of language and the inability to receive the food stamps that we've heard about. Also, maybe ironically statistically speaking, the numbers of Southeast Asian elders who receive SSI benefits are actually very small. In those populations according to 1990 census statistics it's under 10 percent for Hmong, for Lao, and for Cambodian populations. However, the existence of disabilities is enormously high, and again, it's higher among Southeast Asian populations than among any other refugee population that's in the state. The percentage of elders both male and female over 65 in California who are disabled for Cambodians is 68 percent, for Hmong over 71 percent, and for Lao over 63 percent. Therefore, for those who are now receiving SSI benefits we want to be able to maintain those benefits. Clearly they are needed economically and they're needed because of marginalization in a number of categories by refugee elders. But there was a law that was enacted under welfare reform in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Basically, the welfare reform law gave elders seven years of a time period in order to be able to receive benefits, after which if they had not yet become citizens they were going to be cut off from those benefits. If you were receiving SSI prior to the time of welfare reforms enactment on August 22, 1996, or if you entered the country before that time but you became disabled or blind after the time that welfare reform legislation went into affect you can still be permanently receiving SSI, but those who are affected are refugees who had entered the country before August of 1996 but reached age 65 after that time or they entered the country after that time but they later on became disabled or blind. For those in that category, again, they have seven years to acquire citizenship after the time they have entered and if they haven't done that they are elders who are cut off from benefits.

The most important guests here with us today are ones who have faced that, who either have been cut from benefits, who have been under the threat of that or cut and were reinstated, as in the case of **Nang**, or **Mr. Marcheko** who is facing that cut in this next month in August. We want you to hear from them to learn about some of the stresses and anxieties that they're experiencing. I'll call up Sophia. As she comes forward we will pass around an issue brief produced by the organization HIAS that talks about legislation that probably Sophia will mention that is in process. That is one potential part of a solution.

Sophia: This delegation from FIRM and from Fresno will be traveling to Washington D.C. next week to meet with our representatives and senators on this issue of the seven-year time limit for SSI for disabled and elderly refugees. We will be participating on Wednesday in a legislative briefing

June 8, 2005

sponsored by FIRM in addition to several national organizations including the Southeast Asian Resource and Action Center, Hmong National Development, and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. **There will be three specific requests that we are making of members of Congress while we are in D.C. One of them is for increased sponsorship and support and hopefully passage of two bills in Congress. One is Senate Bill 453, and its companion is House Resolution 899. Both of these bills would provide an additional two years of SSI eligibility to elderly and disabled refugees and would reinstate benefits for anyone who had been cut off for an additional two years.** Certain members of our delegation who are not encumbered by particular funds that enable the trip will be making that specific request, but we do hope that members of Congress can hear that, and you can be involved in this issue by asking your representatives to support that legislation. We will also be asking for an expedited naturalization process for the approximately 40,000 elders nationwide who are affected by this issue. We'll be asking members of Congress to work with citizenship and immigration services to get that done. **But ultimately, what we are asking in whatever way it is possible, whether it is through the passage of these two bills, whether it is through some language in the budget reconciliation process, whether it is through the reauthorization of the welfare reform legislation that is coming up later this year, ultimately we are asking for relief for this population in some way this year** because, as you will hear, this is a very pressing and very serious issue. I'll turn it over now to the elders who will be traveling with us so you can hear briefly from them some of their personal stories. They each represent a different facet of this issue. **Ms. Hou Lee** has spent many years trying to become a citizen and has lost her SSI, **Ms. Nang Seng Ha** recently gained her citizenship and regained her SSI, and Mr. **Marchenko** will be cut off this month.

Ms. Hou Lee: **(Translation)** My name is Hou Lee and I am representing the Hmong refugees. My husband and I were in the Veit Nam War and my husband was fighting with the American soldiers, and because we lost, Americans had promised to bring us peace and that's why we're here today. We're here because we have no place to go. We have no land to farm and we cannot live elsewhere, so that's why we're here. What I'm here today for is I want to let all of you know that since I've been here I've been working very hard to keep up with my citizenship and because I came after the dates that Sharon had just mentioned I've been cut on my SSI September of 2003 and I have not had any money from anywhere since then. I am a big parent supporter of the school Fresno Unified. I've gone to almost every parent meeting that they have. Unfortunately, one night one of the transportation persons drove me back home from a school meeting and we got into a car accident, and that's how I became myself right now, and I'm very hurt and I'd like to ask the government, I'd like to ask the people who are here who have access to legislation, are we the people who come after such and such date not deserving of the SSI income benefits? If we are here and we have no one else to support us and we're not getting any money anywhere to help us pay our bills and make a living here this is not justice. I just want to go back a little bit that prior to my cut of the SSI I had already been attending school trying to get my citizenship. However, when I got into the car accident I have lost memory. Right now I cannot retain anything that I've learned for the day. When I walk out the door it's gone. I just want to emphasize that I really do need the help to get this legislation passed and help myself and the group of people who have been cut from SSI benefits. I also want to add that I did try to apply for the CAPI Program. However, the county has told me that if they are going to give me that sort of benefit they will cut the benefits for my children. My children are more important to me, so I have decided not to take the CAPI income benefits and have let the county go ahead and support my children. I want to add that I have no income as of this minute and I am depending on relatives to bring me food, help me pay my bills, and the money that my children get from the county helps pay the bills so that we can stay in a home, but I am very, very sad and I'm very, very concerned and depressed, too, that I am here but I'm not getting any benefits and no support from anywhere. I would like for you to consider this and please help to make the legislation a positive thing for people like me. I am very depressed and with no income, no support, I can't drive, can't go anywhere right now. If I don't get SSI benefits and I am dependent on people to give me support I'd rather die.

June 8, 2005

Ms. Nang Seng Ha: (Translation) My name is **Nang Seng Ha**. I come to the United States in 1996. The year 2003 my SSI was cut off because the time limit from 1996 that I came. I tried very hard after they cut off my SSI check and then I tried to let somebody help me apply for GR. They paid me \$150 a month. After that I applied for CAPI and CAPI helped me and paid me. I took the citizenship class at FIRM for one year, but I got nothing. I couldn't remember. It's very difficult for me because I'm old. I try and I try but I can't. After that I took a citizenship test but couldn't pass that, so I went to see a doctor and the doctor did a medical waiver for me, so immigration made a decision and passed the test for me so I received my certificate to become a citizen now just only a month ago.

Victor Marchenko: Hello ladies and gentlemen. I'm glad to see you. My name is **Victor Marchenko**. My age is 69. I am widower. **(Translation)** I am from Slavic people. People from our community are 65 and 75 years old. We were persecuted in the Soviet Union because we were Christians and we came to the U.S. blessed by God. We came to this country as a refugee and we have opportunity to become citizen. Also, we face so many problems when we came to the U.S. because we had some problems in the Soviet Union. We have problem to learn English, and we have more problem over here to study English than we had over there. It's hard to learn English because of pronunciation and spelling. I have examples of hard pronunciation. To learn 100 questions on citizenship test is impossible for us. If it would be maybe 50 or less questions maybe we could learn those questions. In class sometimes it's no problem to write simple sentences. When the teacher asks sometimes I get lost and I don't know how to answer. We have problems when we have tests. Four times a year we have tests at Fresno Unified School. Two hours we work hard and we have more than 30 questions and we don't have breaks. It's against any rules. Even for young people after one hour there's supposed to be a break. We don't have any excuse. I feel blood pressure after those hours and so many classmates they become red in the face, nose, ears. After those tests I feel sick for one week and I also have blood going through my nose. In the morning I clean my nose with napkins because blood is in my nose. Other students have the same problem. One woman from our apartment complex passed away because of blood pressure. I wasn't sure if I was going to pass the citizenship test, but just one month ago I applied for citizenship. From August 1 I'm going to lose my SSI benefits. I don't know how to survive. I have medical problems such as blood pressure, diabetes, heart pain, and headaches. I am asking for your support and do anything to help us out. God bless you, and God bless America.