

Transcribed Excerpts of Iowa Governor Robert Ray's Congressional Hearing Testimony about Refugee Legislation, May 24, 1979

Mr. Leach: Madam Chairwoman, I am very pleased to introduce to the subcommittee Governor Ray. Iowa has the most comprehensive and probably successful refugee program of any state in the country. This past January I had the privilege to visit Northeast Thailand and met many of those from whose groups the majority of refugees in Iowa come. I visited particularly five or six families who were making final preparations to come to Iowa.

On behalf of the state and governor, I conveyed to these families our respect for their goals and the state of Iowa's desire to help. I will never forget the statement of one of the leaders who said, "Yes, Governor Ray, I hear good things about him from my cousin in Des Moines."

I would like to stress that people around the world are hearing good things about Governor Robert Ray. He is the senior elected administrative leader in America today. He's combined a unique blend of fiscal conservatism with basic human compassion.

Not only has he taken the lead in the governors' conferences in the refugee issue, he's taken the lead on the governors' conference on the D.C. voting rights bill.

We feel strongly that we should not have a disenfranchised group of people in this country.

We should also have a country where people are welcome. This is a country of immigrants ...

Governor Ray: ... The plight of the people fleeing Communism in Indochina is truly a momentous question facing the Congress and the American people. Human lives are at stake. Already hundreds, if not thousands — the majority women and children — have perished at sea.

Our need to come to the aid of these people is the main reason I come before you today. Our response to this problem will to a large degree determine whether more lives are lost or saved.

I fully realize that you, Madam Chairwoman, and the members of this committee are acutely aware of the gravity of this issue. The concern you and Representative Fish exhibited for the plight of these unfortunate people and your efforts to discern the level of their suffering during your recent trip to Southeast Asia are well known to many of us.

I also believe it is important for your committee to have input from the states on the matter of refugee resettlement. For, while it is the President and the Attorney General who decide to admit the refugees, and the Congress that appropriate the money to move them here, it is ultimately the states which receive them.

We — and here I am referring to both the public and private sectors — are responsible for educating, employing and caring for them. We therefore have accumulated a great deal of experience which should be useful to you in your deliberations.

With that in mind, let me turn to our experiences in Iowa and briefly outline the history and direction of our program. The story of refugee resettlement in Iowa began in July 1975 when the administration in Washington indicated that refugees were not being resettled as quickly as they were moving into camps.

President Ford asked the nation's governors what we might do to aid in this process. We determined that we could be of help and I decided that the state of Iowa would become a primary agency for resettlement and authorized our entry into a contract with the State Department.

The next step was to locate the refugees to come to Iowa. Through Iowans working in one of the refugee camps, we learned of a community of people — perhaps a tribe would be a better word — known as the Tai Dam or Black Tai. There were approximately 1400 of these mountain people who had lived in the highlands of Vietnam and China for generations, but who had fled to Laos in 1954 after the Communist takeover of Hanoi.

After careful consideration we decided we would bring the Tai Dam to Iowa. By accepting them as a group what is referred to as a cluster resettlement — we hoped to achieve several goals:

First, we felt the Tai Dam's cultural heritage and social structure could be preserved if they were resettled in one area. Otherwise, they faced dispersal to all parts of the United States with little chance of maintaining their identity.

Secondly, keeping their ethnic and tribal structure intact, we felt, would provide a mutually reinforcing support system as the refugees made the difficult adjustment to a new culture.

I am happy to report to you that both of those goals were achieved and the resettlement of the Tai Dam has been beyond expectation. These people have become productive, contributing members of our society, paying taxes and earning their own way. A survey recently conducted indicated that over one-third of the families are purchasing their own homes. There has been little need for welfare assistance and all seeking work are gainfully employed.

We are pleased with this record and I would like to take just a moment to outline some of the salient points which contributed to it.

Great credit for this performance must go to the sponsors, those Iowans who voluntarily came forward to accept the moral commitment of helping a refugee family start anew. Without their selfless devotion and giving, this would not have been possible. The sponsors were and remain the first crucial ingredient in any resettlement effort.

A second factor on which I place considerable emphasis is the "job orientation" we gave to the refugee program. As I mentioned earlier, Ms. Shearer, the director of the Iowa program, is also the head of our Department of Job Service. We have endeavored to establish close ties between these agencies.

For example, we have hired specialists to work both in our Refugee Service Center and in the Job Service Department to counsel the refugees on employment and to help them find jobs.

This linkage has been invaluable in creating a work climate rather than a welfare climate, as I understand has occurred in many other areas.

I cannot overemphasize the importance I attach to inculcating these new arrivals with a work ethic — not really hard to do, in as much as that has been their custom in the past. But like anyone else, they are susceptible to the pernicious temptation of something for nothing. We cannot claim 100 percent effectiveness, but our low cash assistance figures for the Tai Dam over the past four years testifies to the efficacy of this approach.

A third factor in our success has been the outreach work done by the caseworkers of our Refugee Service Center. Once a refugee is transferred to his or her sponsor, we do not consider our obligation ended.

In fact, we considered follow-up to be an essential part of the resettlement process. By maintaining this relatively small and inexpensive office, the refugee knows he or she always has a place to turn for help and assistance, if needed; and we have a way of following that person's progress and the capability to step in with guidance and counseling, should that need arise.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention at this point the valuable work being done in Iowa, and across the country, by the voluntary agencies who have resettled the majority of the refugees in the country. We enjoy a close working relationship with these groups who have done so much for the refugee program.

Finally, of course, we must recognize the refugees themselves. They are the ones who must struggle to make the adjustment. They are the ones who must work the long hours mostly at entry level wages. They are the ones who must endure the difficulties that all immigrants undergo. In the final analysis, our success is their success, and vice versa.

It was based on this initial success that we considered taking further action last December to assist the "boat people" who were fleeing Vietnam in increasing numbers by sea, often in frail boats unsuited for such an arduous journey. Because the refugees were arriving at a far faster rate than we and other free world countries were accepting them, local Malaysian officials began pushing boats back out to sea.

Some of them broke up under the merciless pounding of the waves and in one short period over 400 people drowned. Thousands of others -- the lucky ones -- are languishing in camps such as the little strip of sand beach at Pulau Bidong, which has been dubbed the "Island of the Hopeless." This suffering was brought vividly home to me in a television documentary prepared by CBS newsman Ed Bradley which aired on January 16.

After watching it, I saw that we really only had two choices: we could either turn our backs as countless others suffered and died, or we could extend a hand to help, and in so doing prevent tragic loss of innocent lives.

Actually, I saw only one real choice. I wrote President Carter January 17, informing him that Iowa would resettle an additional 1500 refugees during this year.