

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

STATEMENT OF HONORABLE ROBERT D. RAY, GOVERNOR OF IOWA; accompanied by JOYCE SAVALE, JAMES JORDAN, SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO HONOURABLE WILLIAM G. MILLIKEN, GOVERNOR OF MICHIGAN, and KENNETH QUINN.

Mr. Leach: Thank you.

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 the 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 ...

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 ...

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.