

They fled horrors of Vietnam, Cambodia but need help

BY ANDREW J. HAWKINS
DAILY NEWS WRITER

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Lak Tev left war-torn Cambodia in 1985 with three children and only the memory of her husband, murdered by the brutal Khmer Rouge regime.

To find a better life, she came to the Bronx.

And life is better, but still a struggle. Tev, 52, and her children work hard, crafting bowls and hair accessories for money, and make do with the little help they get from the government.

But she is still haunted by her experience in Cambodia, working in the labor camps and watching as her family and friends disappeared, one after the other.

"I miss them a lot," she said through a translator. "Life hasn't been the same since."

She has pain, both mental and physical. But to her, the pain is one and the same.

Depression, trauma and war-related flashbacks are plaguing the Bronx's Southeast Asian community, and a new survey says treatment can be hard to come by.

Almost half of the Bronx's 10,000 Southeast Asians are at-risk for depression, according to a survey by New York University and local groups.

During the 1980s, many refugees fleeing war-ravaged Vietnam and Cambodia resettled in the Bronx, most making their home in Fordham.

Very few speak English and many live below the poverty line, relying on public assistance for their medical needs.

"The findings were quite striking," said Douglas Nam Le, director of NYU's Southeast Asian Program, who along with the Bronx-based Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV) documented the community's history and current health.

Many Southeast Asian immigrants in the Bronx had firsthand experience with the Khmer Rouge, the Communist regime responsible for more than 1.7 million deaths in Cambodia during the 1970s.

Some are even former Khmer Rouge members who feel they were "used by the system" and have experienced trauma of their own, Le said.

A huge problem in seeking help for depression and other mental health problems is finding someone who speaks their language.

The Indochinese Mental Health Clinic at the Montefiore Family Health Center on E. 193rd St., for example, has translators available over the phone, which many residents find confusing and disrespectful, said Chhaya Chhoum, director of CAAAV's Youth Leadership Project.

Sister Jean Marshall, the founder of St. Rita's Center for Immigrants and Refugees, agreed.

"The problem is dealing with these translation services on the phone," she said. "They don't work well enough to get everyone - the doctors, the patients, the translators - on the same wavelength."

Even those receiving medicine through Medicaid and other public assistance programs would prefer access to more traditional Asian methods of treatment, such as acupuncture, massage and horticultural therapy, Le said.

CAAAV recently set out to record the hardships and struggles of its community, recording and putting immigrants' stories on display for the public.

Tev was relieved to finally be able to tell her story. For years she had remained silent, not even telling her children in full detail what had happened to their father. "We all have to share these stories," she said.