

An Evaluation of Lifetrack Services

to Karen in a Second Wave of Migration to Worthington, Minnesota:

Nine Rays of Light Reach the Star of the North

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### **Executive Summary**

Between October 1998 and June 2010, 2,792 refugees from Burma, mostly via Thai refugee camps, arrived in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Human Services Resettlement Programs Office, 2010). The highest number of refugees, 667, from Burma came in DHS grant year 2006 (October 2006 through September 2007). In the first three quarters of the current grant year (GY 2009), 595 refugees arrived in Minnesota from Burma (Minnesota Department of Human Services Resettlement Programs Office, 2010). The Seasonally Adjusted Current Unemployment Rate for Minnesota for July 2010 is 6.8 percent with a historical high of 9.1 percent in December of 1982 and a low of 2.5 percent in March of 1999 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). The combination of limited English proficiency plus a highly competitive job market has made finding full-time work difficult for refugees. Innovative employment services for refugees looked beyond St. Paul, the Minnesota city where the majority of refugees from Burma first settle, to small towns where higher paying, full-time jobs are available to people with limited English proficiency. Lifetrack Resources was one of the first employment agencies to place refugees in Worthington, Minnesota. This is a study of the views of seven refugees from Burma on their relocation to Worthington to obtain employment and the role of Lifetrack Resources in assisting with their moves.

*Keywords:* refugees, Karen, Burma, Myanmar, migration, employment, relocation, Worthington

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Nine Rays of Light Reach the Star of the North

When the first people come... they help the next people, like this. When they come... they help the next people. So the next people help the next people. We help each other. ... Somebody who work in the company helped the first people.... Somebody who work in the company, they saw us walking so they want to pick us up every day. ... Then they help the next people. The next people help the second next people.

--Refugee from Burma living in Worthington

If they give us ... courage to get a job...courage to help us get a job.

--Refugee from Burma living in Worthington in answer to question of how Lifetrack could have been more helpful

The current number of refugees in Minnesota is estimated at more than 70,500 people although the number is difficult to verify because people move to and from other states. Minnesota gains at least 500 persons each year from other states; the number lost is unknown.

(Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2010)

...worldwide refugee resettlement figures are very low; fewer than one percent of refugees will ever be considered and accepted for resettlement.

(United States Department of State, 2010)

**Refugee Resettlement**

The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) assists refugees in the United States with resettlement through its partners the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Organization for Migration, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East (UNRWA) (United States Department of State, 2010). Refugees approved for admission to the United States are sponsored by one of ten resettlement agencies participating in the Reception & Placement (R&P) Program through an agreement with the Department of State. These ten agencies often have local affiliations with individual

nonprofits in cities across the country. The resettlement organizations, called Voluntary Agencies (Volags), for FY2009 are:

<b>Voluntary Agencies (Volags) FY2009</b>
<b>Ten Resettlement Agencies participating in the Reception &amp; Placement (R&amp;P) Program under a Cooperative Agreement with the United States Department of State</b>
Church World Service
Episcopal Migration Ministries
Ethiopian Community Development Council
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services
International Rescue Committee
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
World Relief

(United States Department of State, 2009).

<b>Minnesota Volag Affiliates</b>
Catholic Charities
International Institute of Minnesota
Lutheran Social Services
Minnesota Council of Churches
World Relief Minnesota

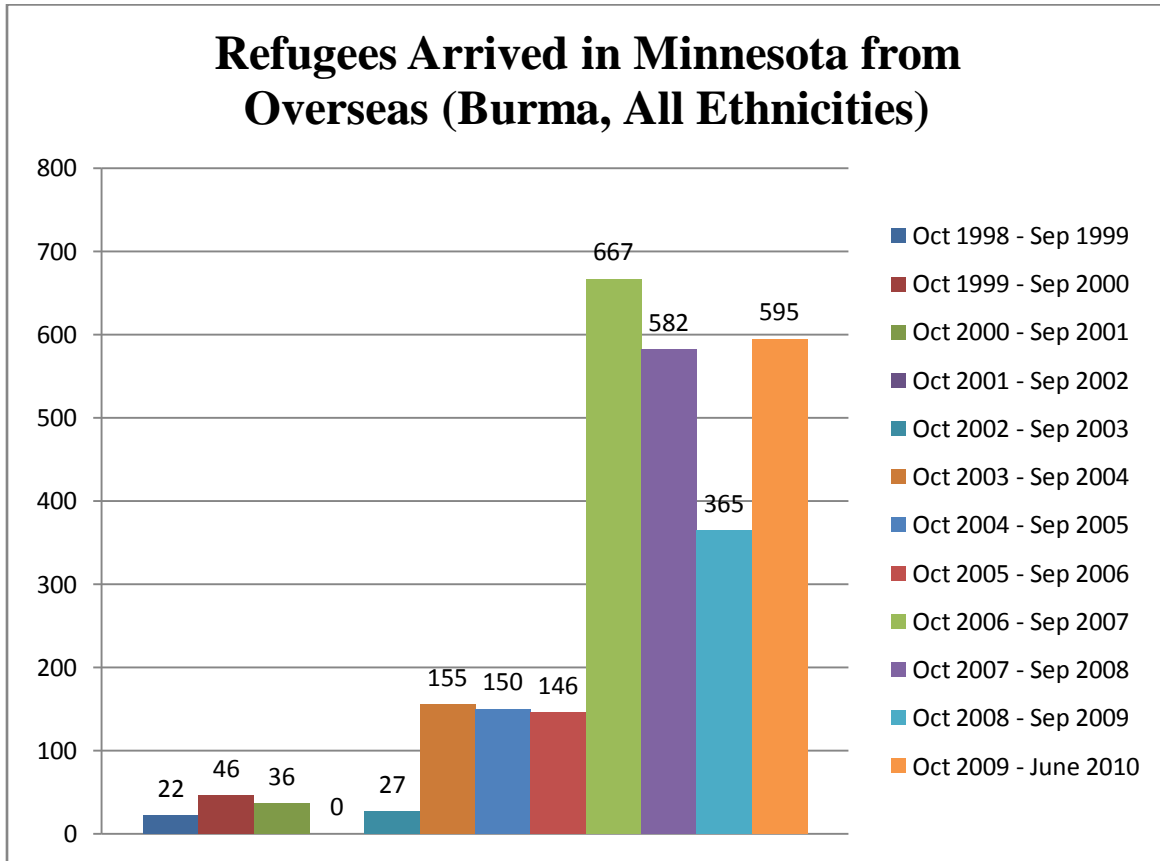
(Heldt, 2010)

After the sponsoring agency places a refugee with one of the local Volags, the local agency is responsible for assistance for the first 30 to 90 days in the U.S. Assistance includes housing, furniture, pots, pans, dishes, etc, food, clothing, orientation to the community; help with registering for public assistance, including food and medical support; help with applying for social security cards and referral and assistance to connect with other social services, medical and employment services (United States Department of State, 2009). Refugees are eligible for public assistance programs upon arrival. Other services are available that are funded through

the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement employment services, English classes and other support services (United States Department of State, 2009). The Lifetrack employment services being evaluated in this study are those funded by Refugee Employment Services from the Minnesota Human Services Resettlement Program Office through the federal Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement.

### **Refugees in Minnesota**

Refugees often face the multiple challenges of learning a new language and culture; obtaining housing, employment, and health care services; finding culturally appropriate, affordable childcare; orienting to a new city; finding suitable transportation; and overcoming resettlement into poverty, and possible personal and physical traumas from war and social isolation. Furthermore, many refugees have little or no work history due to living in refugee camps for many years. All refugees are new to the American work system and all arrive with legal authorization to work. According to the USCIS, “if you entered the U.S. as a refugee you are authorized employment as part of your refugee status” (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2005). Between October 1998 and June 2010, 2,792 refugees from Burma, mostly via Thailand, arrived in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Human Services Resettlement Programs Office, 2010). So far, the largest number of refugees in a year, 667, from Burma came in DHS grant year 2006 (October 2006 through September 2007). In the first three quarters of the current grant year (GY 2009), 595 refugees arrived in Minnesota from Burma (Minnesota Department of Human Services Resettlement Programs Office, 2010).



**Figure 1 Data compiled from Minnesota Department of Human Services Resettlement Programs Office, 2010**  
 (note final quarter arrival numbers not available)

At the August 12, 2010 VOLAG meeting in Minneapolis, the combined agencies reported that from the beginning of calendar year 2010 until August 12, 2010, 1290 refugees had been resettled by them with 561 or 43.5 percent coming from Burma.

<b>Primary Refugee Arrivals by Country of Origin, Minnesota, 1/1/2010 to Present</b> (Source: Refugee Consortium Volag Meeting, August 12, 2010)		
BURMA	561	43.5%
SOMALIA	309	24.0%
IRAQ	148	11.5%
BHUTAN	127	9.8%
ETHIOPIA	53	4.1%
CONGO	20	1.6%
LIBERIA	12	0.9%
LAOS/HMONG	12	0.9%
ERITREA	12	0.9%
BELARUS	12	0.9%
CONGO, DR	10	0.8%
RWANDA	4	0.3%
MOLDOVA	3	0.2%
CUBA	3	0.2%
KYRGYZSTAN	2	0.2%
SIERRA LEONE	1	0.1%
IRAN	1	0.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1290</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 1 Data from Refugee Consortium Volag Meeting, August 12, 2010

### The Karen People

All people from Burma who were connected to Lifetrack were welcome to participate in this study. Ethnicity was not asked as a requirement to be in the study; however, all of the people interviewed spoke Karen as their first language. The Karen area is “primarily in Karen State, in Kayah State (Karenni State), southern Shan State (MoBye Region), Ayeyarwady Division (Irrawaddy Division), Southern Kawthoolei (Tenasserim Coastal Region) and in western Thailand” (Neiman, Soh, & Sutan, 2008). “There are over six million Karen in Burma,



and over 400,000 in Thailand, most of whom are divided into two subgroups - the Skaw [Sgaw] (or P Gaganyaw) and the Pwo (or Plong)” (KarenPeople.org, 2010). “Within the eight main ethnic groups inhabiting the country [Burma], anthropologists have counted more than 130 distinctive subgroups” (Barron, et al., 2007).

### **Lifetrack Resources**

Lifetrack Resources is a nonprofit human services agency with a mission to *work together to develop the strengths within children, families and adults facing the greatest life challenges*. According to Lifetrack Resources, the organization was founded in 1948 as the *St. Paul Rehabilitation Center* to help people with polio and other physical challenges, including people returning from World War II. Their focus expanded with the changing times to include rehabilitation and employment services. Currently, there are the full time equivalent (FTE) of 95 staff members who speak 18 languages, plus 12 staff members who are fluent in American Sign Language (Lifetrack Resources, 2010).

Since October 2000, Lifetrack has received funding from the Minnesota Department of Social Service’s Resettlement Program Office (RPO) to assist newly arriving refugees in obtaining employment through the Refugee Employment Services (RES) grant.

RES providers can place refugees anywhere in MN, provided that the placement site is within a 50-mile radius of their office in order for them to continue support services as needed. If the placement site is located farther than within a 50-mile radius of their office, they have to submit an agreement with a local social service agency to provide support services to the placed refugees as they adjust to their new environment before they can get the placement credit. A. Sabah (personal communication, September 10, 2010)

Lifetrack has an agreement with a local service provider:

Lifetrack Resources has a Memorandum of Agreement in place with Jerry Fiola of the District 518 Community Education to provide additional supports to refugees relocated to Worthington. This document states: “In the event that Lifetrack Resources consortium is working with refugee or immigrant families who choose to move to

Worthington, Minnesota area, for employment District 518 Community Education to assist those individuals to enroll in ESL and GED and provide Community Resources for Education, Housing, Child Care, Transportation, and Health Care for refugees and immigrants.” D. Heldt (personal communication, September 9, 2010)

In grant year 2009 (October 1, 2009-September 30, 2010), Lifetrack also received a Minnesota Department of Human Services RPO Refugee Social Services (RSS) grant. Funding from both RES and RSS is used to serve refugees, but only the RES program was examined during this evaluation because the placements studied predate the social services contract. Lifetrack is a consortium partner and fiscal host of the RES Program and operates in partnership with Vietnamese Social Services (VSS). The two agencies applied for funding together, work through the same grant award, and meet bi-weekly to coordinate services. RPO provides continued funding based on their joint outcomes. This is significant because VSS has many Karen staff members and, like Lifetrack, has gained credibility in serving the Karen community. For the purposes of this study, however, the services provided directly by Lifetrack were the only services examined. Information from VSS is not included within the scope of this study.

It should be noted that even though it was not an objective required by the state RES grant, social services which were needed were supplied to refugees.

<b>Contracted Goals of Lifetrack Resources Employment &amp; Employment Support</b>
Connect with community leaders of new refugee populations to explain benefits of the program
Enroll Eligible Refugees into Employment Services Program
Conduct individual assessments with enrolled refugees
Develop Family Self-Sufficiency and Employability Plans and provide case management in support of employment goals
Provide structured job search, motivation, and job search support
Provide short-term job skill training targeted to specific industries in partnership with employers
Placement into paid work experience, as available
Job Placement in competitive employment
Maintain contact with employed refugees and employers to provide job coaching, job retention, and follow-up

D. Heldt (personal communication, September 9, 2010)

In addition to these contracted goals, Lifetrack also provided employment supports to reduce barriers to employment and ensure that families who were relocated to Worthington had resources for essential needs such as: school, food, clothing, and housing. D. Heldt (personal communication, September 9, 2010)

Through the RES grant Lifetrack placed 80 people from Burma in Worthington to work at the JBS Plant between December 6, 2007 and February 23, 2010. People from Burma were brought to Worthington as individuals or in groups of as many as six people accompanied by one or two staff people from Lifetrack. Usually between three to six clients were brought to Worthington together. Although sometimes people were brought to Worthington for mutual consideration and returned to St. Paul for later placement, other people brought to Worthington stayed in Worthington from the first visit. Some applicants were interviewed by JBS in St. Paul. Dates of placement and the numbers of people placed in Worthington are shown on the table below in Figure 4. The order of placement (first group, second group, et cetera) was an important factor to the people placed, as will be discussed in the *Findings* section. The JBS plant worked closely with Lifetrack and provided transportation reimbursement to Lifetrack for transporting people to Worthington.

JBS also offered reimbursement for temporary housing arrangements usually at a local motel a five minute walk from the JBS. Permanent housing arrangements were made by Lifetrack staff members who worked individually with the clients who relocated to work at JBS. Lifetrack Resources has a Memorandum of Agreement with JBS:

In the event that Lifetrack Resources consortium is working with a refugee or immigrant family who choose to move to Worthington, Minnesota area, for employment with JBS SA, Worthington, JBS SA, Worthington will assist those individuals with relocation and housing assistance by offering one week free in a hotel; after which they have a choice to select two more weeks in a hotel or one months rent up to \$500.00 or

rental deposit up to \$500; moving expenses up to \$500.00 such as a bus ticket or gasoline if original receipts are submitted; and referrals to local available housing.

D. Heldt (personal communication, September 9, 2010)

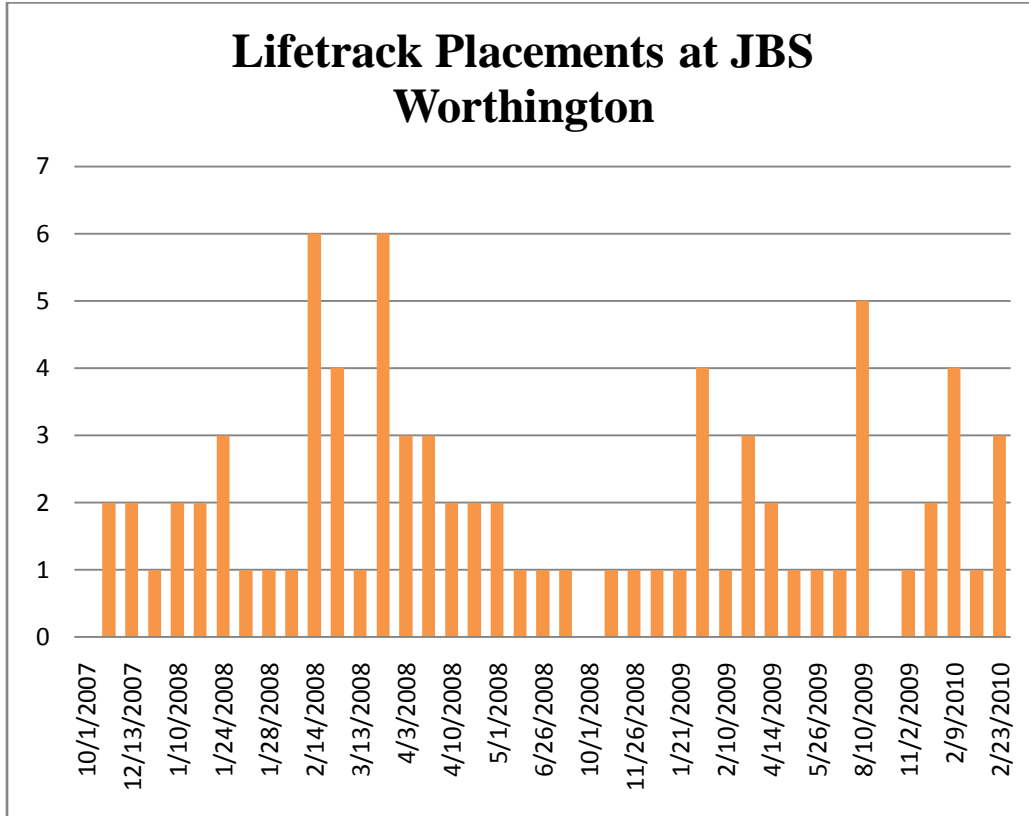


Figure 2 Lifetrack Placements at JBS Worthington. Data compiled from Heldt, 2010.

### Lifetrack 90 Day Job Retention of JBS Placements Made 12/6/07-5/1/2008

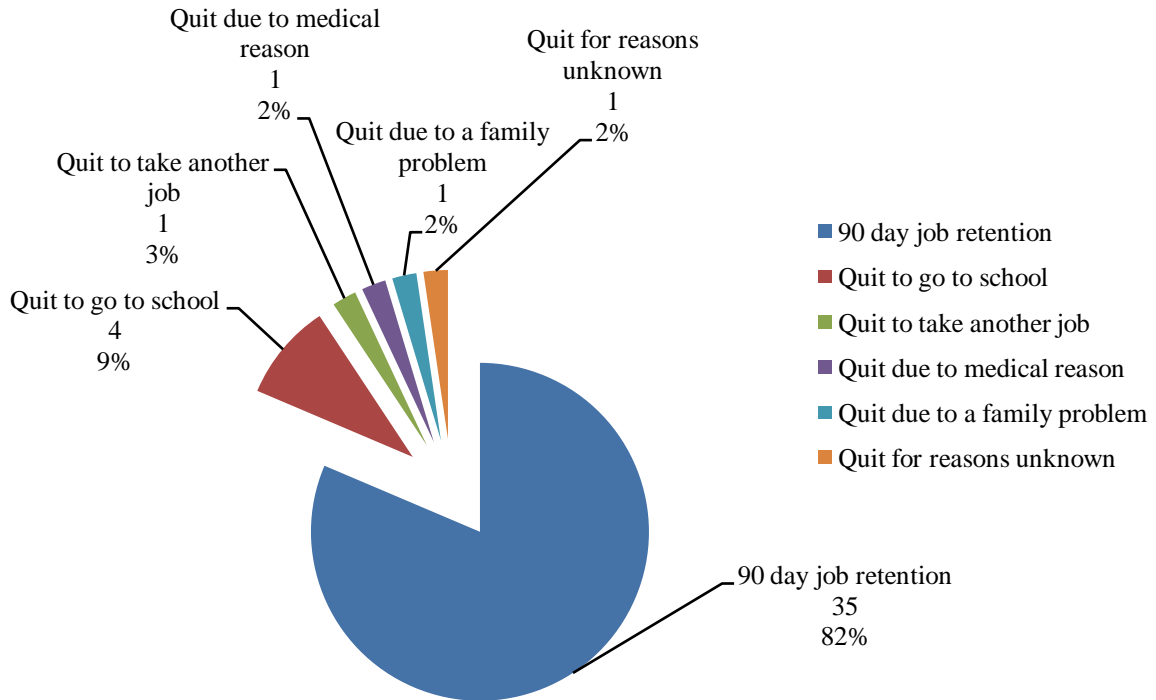


Figure 3 Lifetrack 90 Day Job Retention of Placements Made 12/6/07-5/1/2008. Data compiled from Heldt, 2010.

#### Worthington, Minnesota

Worthington is a town of 11,283, according to the 2000 census. Located off Interstate 90, 63 miles west of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and just north of the Iowa border, Worthington is roughly 185 miles southwest of St. Paul, Minnesota. It is difficult to determine the current population of people from Burma living in Worthington for several reasons: first because 2010 census data were not available yet and may not be able to distinguish people from Burma from other Asian groups; second, because social service agencies generally do not have funding to continue to track the location of their clients long term and do not know if people stay where they are placed; and third, because there is currently no reliable tracking system to determine the

numbers of secondary migrants from Burma who originally resettled in other states and later moved to Worthington. Unofficial estimates of the Karen population in Worthington are between 300 and 400 people at this time. JBS is the largest employer in Worthington with an estimated number of 2,300 employees; the school district is the second largest employer in Worthington with 500 employees (Rohrer & Associates, 2010).

### **Methodology**

Lifetrack Resources staff provided an initial list of community leaders among people from Burma living in Worthington. They also provided a list of clients or former clients they had placed in Worthington who could speak some English so that an interpreter would not be necessary. The list of names was used as a starting point. Although a dozen or so people were listed as community leaders, and no doubt are, it soon became clear that the community was well-organized with an elected leader, who served as a key contact for this study. In order to protect the identity of the people being interviewed, care was used to not reveal the date of obtaining employment or particular position held in Worthington. Most, but not all of the people interviewed were employed by JBS. All of the people interviewed had somehow been involved with Lifetrack, but to varying degrees. It was important to start with known refugee contacts in Worthington but to allow for referrals of other people who met interview criteria. Some of the people listed by Lifetrack were either no longer in Worthington or their current location was unknown.

Although the opinions of individual respondents were requested, interviews were a hybrid of individual and group responses. Interviews were conducted in the living rooms of people's homes. Sometimes as many as a dozen people were in attendance during the interview, while at other times the person being interviewed stayed while several other people came and

went from the room. To be sensitive to time constraints, the option was given to ask one person all the questions and then ask the next person all the questions, which would allow people to be available for the shortest time, or to ask one question at a time and go around the circle to hear each person's individual response, requiring the entire group to remain available until the conclusion of all the interviews. The latter option was chosen by the group and the same question was asked to each person in turn before moving on to the next question. Each individual responded to each question. Frequently other members of the group would offer additional helpful background information and clarification. Only the answers to the questions from people somehow involved with Lifetrack Resources are presented in this study. Signed consent forms were obtained from the seven official respondents. All interview participants were asked: Why did you decide to move to Worthington, who were the people who helped you when you moved to Worthington, was Lifetrack helpful (Likert Scale with follow-up questions: helping you find a job, helping you travel to Worthington, helping you locate a place to live, helping you know the city of Worthington, helping you register for English classes, helping you find a way to get to work each day, helping you find a doctor, helping you find a grocery store, helping you get furniture for your house), are you working now, what is your job, how long have you been at your current job, what do you like about your job, do you prefer life in the Twin Cities or in Worthington, and what languages do you speak?

### **Findings**

Although there were slight variations, most respondents were satisfied with the services provided by Lifetrack. There was a consensus that people arriving more recently needed less help than earlier groups, but there were even variations in the views of individuals who arrived in the same group. A surprising finding was that people were very clear on which group they were

a member of (first, second, third, et cetera) and which people came before or after them, perhaps due to the high level of organization and collectivistic nature of the community. A common theme of the responses was that the first groups needed the most help:

People from 2008 need the help, after that we know the city.

After 2009, it's OK, because they help each other. Before 2008 it's a little bit hard.

When the first people come... they help the next people, like this. When they come... they help the next people. So the next people help the next people. We help each other. ... Somebody who work in the company helped the first people.... Somebody who work in the company, they saw us walking so they want to pick us up every day. ... Then they help the next people. The next people help the second next people.

Many people in the Worthington Karen community knew each other while living in camps in Thailand and were either blood relatives or considered to be relatives (unofficial relatives) by one another. Earlier arrivals to Worthington expressed a desire for even more help than was offered while later arrivals wanted only the employment assistance. One early arrival who would have liked more help explained how Lifetrack staff took him to many places around Worthington. He wanted to go *into* the stores instead of seeing them through the car window as they were driving around. He would have also liked more information about going to church.

They helped some, not the whole city...they come they don't have time. They busy with their job they go to company they come back they introduced to us to the school... If they show me the Asian store, like Walmart, they show me but I couldn't see, it's hiding behind a lot of buildings...the Asian store is important because we like, we like Asian food...I want them to show us the church. Some people want to go to church but they don't know where to go. And some people they want to go only Baptist church so they ask an employee where, what church you want to go and show." [Lifetrack could ask you 'which church do you want to see?'] Yeah.

A later arrival described, with help from the group, her satisfaction with what she saw:

They show her, here is the company, you go to work, they also went to the grocery store, Asia Food...Top Asia Food, and also to Walmart...they drive her around the lake...she liked the lake...they took her to a place, how to find a house. [Did you need to see more places?] No.



All seven of the interviewees said that they moved to Worthington “to work” or “to work and be with my family” who had already come to work. In addition to being assisted by Lifetrack staff, respondents reported that friends, relatives, people from JBS, and people in Worthington were helpful to them. Casual conversations revealed that the local Worthington residents were “nice neighbors” and generally helpful and as shown in the quotes above, picked them up for work and showed them the church. All seven thought Lifetrack was helpful in finding them a job in Worthington and want Lifetrack to continue helping with employment for newcomers even though they no longer need other kinds of assistance.

When I was in St. Paul because there was language barriers, ... so we can't speak English so we can't find a job in St. Paul. So Lifetrack helped us to come to Worthington to work at the pork plant called JBS. ... It's like a great job.... because we have to work every day... it's five days a week, every week, every week, so we don't have to worry about layoffs.

Lifetrack's RES grant employs a Karen person from Burma, Amy Twe, also known as Grandmother Amy (Pi Amy), who was often named as being helpful by all seven respondents. One respondent also named a worker from World Relief who brought him to Lifetrack where he was helped by Amy Twe. Sometimes respondents did not know the name or agency of people who were helpful either because they were not introduced or they did not go to the agency itself. Sometimes names and titles were the source of confusion for both interviewer and interviewees. For example, it was not clear at first that Amy Twe is the same person as Pi Amy.

Although housing is not normally part of the RES grant, Lifetrack worked with JBS to secure temporary housing for a few weeks to a month, usually in a motel, for the first groups in Worthington. Later groups, who were reuniting with family members or had friends who had already moved to Worthington usually did not need this kind of help. “The first time I came here I lived in a motel first...for a couple of weeks ...and then Amy looking for another place to get

the current address.” Another respondent states, “they worked together with JBS companies over there and they take the list the house for rent, take the number, they call for us, and they give us a ride to the house that’s available.” Another respondent states, “they drop us here...looking for a place to live. They helped me learn about the ... city of Worthington. They showed us how to register for the English classes...they helped us find a way to get to work each day, find a doctor, a grocery store, to get a furniture for our house... This is a great job so nothing else [could have helped more].”

Lifetrack showed people the schools in Worthington. “They go to school and introduce us to the one of the school worker, maybe principal, I don’t know. They talked to him, they introduce that we are the Karen people and we want to come to school and to help us when we come here if we come to school.” Although respondents said that they know how to register for and attend classes, they said that when they are working they are too tired to take classes and that they would like to do so in the future. One woman who is not employed at JBS finished two years of ESL in Worthington. Another woman on a “break” from JBS is currently registered to begin classes shortly.

The first three groups from St. Paul arrived in December, 2007. The high and low temperatures were 34 °F and -1°F that month (State Climatology Office - DNR Division of Ecological and Water Resources, University of Minnesota, 2010). Wind chill data were not available, but wind chill is a serious frost bite consideration in Minnesota in the winter.

Transportation in Worthington was difficult at first for early arrivals who came in winter. There is no public bus system in Worthington and respondents said that “taxis are too expensive” and may cause tardy arrival at the workplace. Early arrivals walked to work. “We go to work. Sometimes we go by walking. On that time very cold. And we don’t know anybody.”

Sometimes local JBS workers would pick people up as they were walking to work. Later arrivals arranged carpools. People who arrived in warmer temperatures walked the reported “five minutes” to the plant from the motel.

Six of the seven people interviewed reported there was no need for help finding a doctor because they don’t need to see a doctor. They said that they can find a doctor if they need one. The one person who needed medical care was helped by Lifetrack staff. “Pi Amy took me to the clinic to see doctor.” Future research could examine whether or not the people accepted for work were generally healthier than those not moving to Worthington to work.

Worthington has several places to buy groceries: a Hy-Vee store, a Walmart that sells groceries, Ban Lao Market, Hindi Market, a variety of convenience and other stores, but most importantly to the respondents, the Asian market, *Top Asia*. One of the people Lifetrack staff helped lived in a motel upon arrival. She explained, with the help of the group, how everyone housed in the motel eats together:

When she lived in motel she had no food so Amy Twe took her to Top Asia Foods. ... We can cook with the rice cooker in the hotel. ... We bring from St. Paul... she put the egg... in oil and put... a little bit of oil and break the egg and put it in the microwave... it’s good, it’s fast... fast food. A little bit of noodle, it’s fast to cook... microwave, refrigerator, television, office phone... two people in each room... her friend... She cook for five people.”

All seven people interviewed reported that they did not need help finding furniture and know how to get it if they do. Some did not have furniture in Burma and did not want any in Worthington. Some respondents had furniture in St. Paul and found friends to bring it to Worthington. One will wait to buy furniture until he owns his own home. Others bought the furniture they wanted in Worthington on their own. Although some respondents reported that Amy Twe showed them where to get furniture, everyone said that there was “no need” to have help from Lifetrack with finding furniture.

Questions were asked about the interviewees' current employment. Two of the seven said they were off work but wanted to go back and had reapplied; the rest still had their original jobs although some had changed to a different position within the same company. Lengths of time at the job varied between almost three years to six months. All seven reported that they "liked" their jobs or "it was a good job." When asked why they liked their jobs, individuals offered various answers. Two people said that they liked their positions because the work was on a rotation and they got a short break while the other people worked. Another respondent said, "it is also a good job." When asked, "why is it good," she responded, "I can do this job." Some respondents described their work in great detail. There was agreement that what made the job good was that it was steady, permanent, full-time and without layoffs. Comments from three people about work:

it's like a great job.... because we have to work every day... it's five days a week, every week, every week, so we don't have to worry about layoffs.

They [Lifetrack] would like to find better job for me but because of the language...we can't speak English very well...we do not have work experience in the United States so it is the best place Worthington to come and find work.

Somewhat helpful. They [Lifetrack staff] call us...they have once a week looking for a ... job in the county. They call us to interview with people there. Looking for a job fill out the form. [Do you go to Lifetrack (in St. Paul) one time each week?] No, not each week. Sometimes they call us to go looking for a job outside with Amy, like a restaurant and other place like a small factory ...they call us. [Do you get there yourself?] We go by bus. [Was there something that would have helped you more?] If they give us ... courage to get a job...courage to help us get a job .... some other people know how to speak English, when they come here, they directly come to JBS. I saw some people ...they come to America and directly come to here...a job counselor, Lifetrack, they find a job, not only meat factory, finding another job. [In St. Paul?] Yeah. [So it would have been better if they could have helped you find a job in St. Paul?] Yeah. [Is JBS your first job?] Yeah, my first. [Did you interview for many jobs in St. Paul?] Yeah, about two or three jobs, not interview, just fill out application. [What would have given you more courage? (pause) What could Lifetrack do to give you more courage?] I mean, not me, other people, also other people, maybe I want to work here but maybe some other people don't want to work here so if they looking for a suitable work for them around in St. Paul area might be better.

As to their preference for living in St. Paul or Worthington, seven out of seven said they prefer living in Worthington. The following are some of the responses:

Worthington... Like the quiet city...good job, I prefer to live in Worthington.

Worthington, I prefer Worthington because I like to live in a small town. It's quiet...It's easy to find some places...where to go and also we don't need to worry about where to park our car. We can park our car every places. Everything is clean. Not many vehicles are here. I like to live in a small town. The city [St. Paul] is good [because] we have many resources. Here is only a few jobs.

Worthington...I have a job here, also is a quiet place, not busy.

Worthington...yes, my family is here. Worthington is a quiet town, city and when I go to school, it is near.

Here,...because I have job here, this job, I never heard that they lay off people, so I think...secure, because I work two year I heard about other place like Nebraska layoff people, many, many people.

She prefer to live in Worthington...it is a very, very, quiet place. Everything is clear, it is close to go to work, just about 5 minutes; we don't have to drive, too long.

#### Limitations and Future Research

Time, funding, and logistics were limitations for this project. Lifetrack is in St. Paul, and Worthington, the site of the research, is 3.5 hours away by car. The University of Minnesota provided mileage reimbursement for only two trips to Worthington; Lifetrack provided funding for motel stays. Another limitation of this study was the inability of the researcher to speak any languages from Burma. People were sought for interviews who could converse in English. Fortunately, the hybrid interview style, that combined group and individual interviews at once, provided clarification and interpretation without using an outside interpreter. Funding was not available for an outside interviewer. A Lifetrack employee was available to interpret but that option was not used in order to avoid the perception of biased results. People being interviewed

may have felt more comfortable knowing their answers would not be heard by an outside interpreter.

Another limitation was that interviews were limited to the people who could be found through the identified leaders, using the list of names supplied by Lifetrack as a starting point; however, to prevent Lifetrack from knowing which specific people were interviewed, the identified leaders provided access to people they knew who fit the study criteria, regardless of whether or not they were on the original list provided by Lifetrack. The use of identified leaders is a limitation in itself, because it is possible that there are multiple groups of people from Burma living in Worthington, with each group having its own leaders who were not found for interviews. These other groups may have had different opinions which are not represented in this study. In addition, because Lifetrack is funded to track clients for only 90 days after program outcomes are achieved, long-term tracking data, including data about people placed into jobs in Worthington several years ago, were not available.

Although the interviewees responded that they like their jobs, Karen leaders in casual conversations in St. Paul reported that life is difficult in the United States and the work in Worthington is “hard work” due to the repetitive movements and working in the cold. They estimate the wages to be around \$11.50 per hour at JBS in Worthington, higher than cleaning or custodial jobs in St. Paul which they estimate bring \$8.00 per hour. In addition, housing costs are lower in Worthington. Karen Leaders report that people are working in other Minnesota cities, in addition to Worthington. They estimate that in Marshall, Minnesota, there are 80-90 Karen people working, and that in Albert Lea there are about 100 Karen workers with only four or five families living there and the others making the daily two hour commute each way. Wilmar employs 20-30 Karen people. Many Karen people are working in Faribault, but leaders

say that at this time everyone is commuting. So far, leaders know of no Karen families in St. Cloud or Austin. This study was limited to people living in Worthington. The people who were no longer in Worthington may have left due to work hardships, not enjoying the community, family pressures back in St. Paul, better employment elsewhere or other reasons. Future research is needed to study the people who left Worthington to determine the reasons why they left.

Some families are separated when a family member commutes to Worthington and returns home two to four weekends per month. If the commuter is the family member most able to navigate U.S. culture (because he or she can drive, take a bus, or can speak English) and he or she is absent, future research could determine how the absence affects the family remaining in St. Paul. Does the increase in salary, the steadiness of the employment, and reduction in housing expense offset working in a cold environment, doing heavy work and being separated from family? What are the reasons why the rest of the family does not move to Worthington, where housing expenses are lower?

Future research could also investigate the effect of the influx of refugees on the destination cities of relocation. One impact area could include school enrollment levels in a time when existing populations of small communities and school enrollments may otherwise be in decline. For example, JBS is the largest employer in Worthington; the second largest employer is the school district (Rohrer & Associates, 2010). Yet other topics for future research include: examining the benefits of Lifetrack's partnership with VSS; whether or not the people accepted for work were generally healthier than those not moving to Worthington to work; whether or not people from Burma relocated to Worthington by one of the other five agencies have had similar experiences, and whether or not it matters that Lifetrack paved the way with the first workers; the working conditions of the JBS plant and results on health of the people working in them;

effects of undocumented worker raids and the desire to employ workers who have legal work authorization (as refugees do); determining the percentage of people among the total number of employees, who are from Burma working at JBS; and, identifying the numbers of Karen living in Worthington.

### **Suggestions for Consideration**

In an effort to improve services and to continue finding new employment opportunities for people in their programs, Lifetrack requested this study. People from Burma have already moved to other cities in Minnesota for employment. Some people are commuting to Faribault, a one hour drive south from St. Paul on Interstate 35. People from Burma have already been placed in Albert Lea, about 100 miles south of St. Paul, also on Interstate 35. Diane Heldt of Lifetrack Resources reports that Lifetrack has placed 37 people from Burma in Albert Lea since October 5, 2009, with the latest placement on August 12, 2010.

Lifetrack has done many things to create a welcoming environment in their St. Paul office. Cultural competency and language skills are essential to serving newly arrived refugees. Lifetrack has a Karen employment counselor who brings cultural understanding and essential language skills to the already multicultural and multilingual Lifetrack team. Lifetrack has an accessible location only two miles from the hub of the Karen community in St. Paul and it is located on a major bus line. Lifetrack has a one story high mural on the outside of the building which depicts people of many races. The interior is also welcoming with a multi-lingual “peace pole” and other relevant multicultural symbols on the walls of recently arriving refugee cultures, including traditionally woven Karen cloth. An electronic sign in the waiting room displays greetings in many languages. There is a colorful play area in the lobby for children.



It is clear from the interviews that Karen people are accessing services from Lifetrack and getting the help they need. They are not only obtaining employment, but keeping employment and creating a community in Worthington. Informal reports indicate that ten families have already purchased homes in Worthington. The most relevant information revealed in this study is that the Karen community is highly organized, collectivistic and extremely helpful to members of their community. Although busy with their own jobs and families the Karen community is providing social services and employment services in Worthington albeit unpaid services. For example, community leaders are so busy attending to their community that one of the interviews for this study was interrupted by a Karen man who came to the house for assistance. After arrangements were made to alleviate the problem, the interview resumed. This was said to be a common occurrence. To best serve other arriving Karen refugees, Lifetrack could provide even more intensive support to the first groups pioneering settlements in new communities. Some early interviewees expressed an interest in learning even more about the city including finding appropriate housing, transportation, schools for adults and children, social services, faith communities, grocery stores, other resources. This seems a reasonable use of resources considering how the community relays the assistance to the next groups. Specifically, perhaps Lifetrack could station a Karen speaking staff person overnight in a new city and take the first group of new arrivals inside the places of interest to meet the service providers and *see* what is inside the buildings and stores. This would overcome the sentiment in the comment that Lifetrack staff are “busy” and also alleviate the pressure on staff of driving seven hours in one day, plus orienting newcomers. Another strategy would be to identify leaders among the Karen community wanting to move to another city and provide extensive orientation for them. After the initial intensive orientation to a new city and following the establishment of the new

community, Lifetrack could return its focus entirely to the employment objectives, which is indicated in the responses. Interviewees expressed a keen interest in Lifetrack continuing to help with employment even after the community is established: “we still want help looking for the job.” Interview responses indicate that Lifetrack did indeed help the community in the ways that they needed help. They went beyond the call of funder required services and provided community orientation as well as sustainable employment outcomes.

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