

A BRIDGE TO CONNECT CULTURES

and ethnic minorities constitute more than 60 percent of the residents, and nearly half of them speak a language other than English in the home.

The Superior Court of Fresno County has worked hard to reach out to its Hmong community, an ethnic and linguistic group native to Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China. After a large influx of Hmong in the past few years, Fresno County today has the second-largest Hmong community in the United States, with over 35,000 residents.

The Hmong population is not a monolithic group, however. Not only are there different factions, there are varying degrees of assimilation to American ways (many elders still adhere to a clan structure and work out problems through clan leaders) and differing levels of literacy (the written language of the Hmong was not formalized until the 1960s).

In its efforts to connect with the Hmong, the court took two simple yet significant steps: it met with the community on its own territory, in its own language. Judges Adolfo M. Corona and Gary D. Hoff were interviewed (through interpreters) on a Hmong-language radio show about the court and its services. Community response was enthusiastic. A journalist who is also a respected leader in the Hmong community hosted the radio show and hopes to have more interviews, each one focusing on a specific topic.

For Judge Corona, "It was a pleasure to have participated in the Hmong radio show event. It was an honor to be involved in such an activity where I was able to see and appreciate the strong desire of this group of relatively new American immigrants to integrate and to learn more about our justice system and how it can better serve their community. This experience further confirmed my strong belief that, in general, all members of our community wish to be well served by our courts and, if so, would in turn serve their courts—either through jury service or in other ways."

Fresno County possesses one of the fastest-growing and most diverse populations in the state. In recent years, the county's population has grown at a rate nearly twice that of the state. Racial

"From administration to judges to staff, Fresno County courts always strive to provide public service at the highest level of competence, equity, and empathy. We take public access to justice and outreach very seriously and are always looking for ways to make our courts more user-friendly and accommodating."

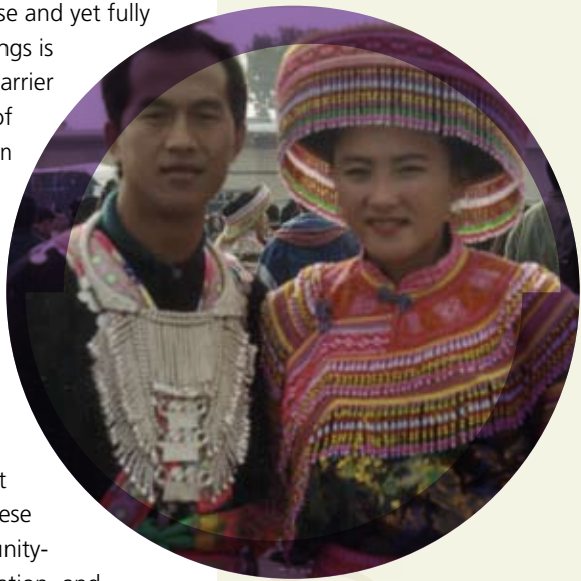
—Judge Adolfo M. Corona

Judge Hoff found that “the ability to be concise and yet fully explain services, programs, and legal proceedings is difficult, especially when there is a language barrier and when there often is no literal translation of the legal concepts. When one superimposes on top of that cultural issues related to lack of trust and confidence in the courts, or at least a lack of awareness of the court’s process, it makes clear that our task of public outreach and education needs to be one which is very broad based, at grassroot levels, and ongoing.”

The court also reached out into the larger community by joining with other agencies that have worked successfully with the Hmong. These agencies include Stone Soup Fresno, a community-based organization that provides health, education, and other services to the Southeast Asian population; the Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministry; and the Fresno Center for New Americans. The court also surveyed the Hmong members of its own staff on how the court could better serve their community.

One change the court has made already is to have a Hmong-language speaker at its one-stop service center. And the court now works more directly with clan leaders to resolve disputes out of court.

Small-group sessions and a large community forum are planned to help the court with its strategic plan and to further improve services.



A Fresno County Superior Court employee with his wife in traditional Hmong dress at a local Fresno event.



Examples of the Hmong culture are shown above, including a musical instrument called a Qeej (top left), a violin (bottom right), and two examples of the beautiful Hmong tapestries with scenes from a marriage ceremony, a hunt, and the traditional agricultural lifestyle.