

Small and Invisible, Yet Strong and Impactful – North Carolina’s Montagnard Community Responds to COVID-19

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To the Editor—As COVID-19’s impact disproportionately affects minority communities, North Carolina’s Montagnard refugee and immigrant community has been no exception. Montagnards, a multi-tribal group, were resettled to the United States from the Vietnam highlands after suffering retribution for supporting American troops during the Vietnam war. The Montagnard Dega Association (MDA) and its youth branch, the Montagnard American Organization (MAO), estimated 50 COVID-19 positive cases by September 10, 2020 (Montagnard Dega Association, email communication, September 10, 2020). But community cases could well be higher (more than 100+) at the writing of this correspondence, since not all affected Montagnards have contacted MDA/MAO regarding infection.

This number might appear small in comparison to other groups, but is significant nonetheless for this group, whose population is estimated at 12,000+ in North Carolina. Montagnards have lived for more than 30 years as an under-noticed minority group, invisible in state and local demographic and health data systems. Life for the Montagnard community remains a continuous loop of language and cultural challenges, limited access to safe and affordable housing, inadequate health care access, and low-wage employment. COVID-19 has exacerbated all these challenges: increased household food insecurity, job loss, lack of viable isolation venues when testing positive, and delays in accessing critically needed care during illness.

While these may be crippling to any low-resource community, the MDA/MAO has ramped up its social media presence and mobilized its community frontline workers to respond. With the mandatory “stay at home” order and closing of non-essential businesses, many families have lost their income or jobs, leading to acute food insecurity and potential evictions from housing. The MAO is using its social media platform to support its members. To address community concerns and inquiries, MAO has created and updated tribal-language-specific social media videos and digital flyers with information on COVID-19 and associated resources [2, 3]. MAO has distributed masks and hand sanitizers and leveraged financial resources to secure hotel rooms for quarantined family members of multigenerational households. To address food insecurity, MDA/MAO has used

its partnerships with local farmers, nonprofits, and higher education to launch and promote a robust food distribution campaign. More than a thousand individuals have received culturally appropriate food items, including fresh vegetables. To support unemployed members, MAO is virtually connecting individuals to local employers seeking workers. Finally, MAO, in collaboration with the Greensboro Housing Coalition, is providing financial assistance to jobless households to help offset their rent. By all accounts, efforts have been impactful and illustrate how a small and invisible group can positively leverage strengths and “know-how” from a legacy of trauma and survival. **NCMJ**

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