

Des Moines Register

NEWS

A widow's wish: More help for refugees

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Way Moo had struck his son back in the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand or in the hill villages of southeastern Burma, where many of his people still live, no one would have batted an eye.

Jobmu, his 5-year-old, had been acting up back in December at McKinley Elementary School in Des Moines. The father's choice of discipline: hitting the boy with a clothes hanger.

But in Iowa — a place that couldn't be more different from the lawless camps where Way Moo and his wife, Mu Mu, lived for more than 15 years — bruises led to child protection workers and many questions.

COMPLETE COVERAGE: From Burma to Iowa, resources scarce for refugees

MORE ON BURMA REFUGEES:

After six decades of war, refugees still flee Myanmar

Newcomers from Burma are Iowa's largest refugee group

In mid-January, Way Moo, 32, walked into the cavernous Polk County River Place building on the near-north side, looking for someone to translate a letter. It was the first time the depressed, out-of-work father of two had sought any help since he was accused of child abuse a month before.

What happened after Way Moo learned the contents of that letter has shaken all those who crossed paths with his family since they moved to Des Moines in 2007.

Way Moo, sitting alone in his living room, covered himself with a blanket.

In a brief phone call, he told his wife he loved her and asked her to look after their

children.

Then he took a .22-caliber rifle and shot himself twice in the chest.

Hopeful beginnings, gauntlet of obstacles

The U.S. Department of State this year is winding down one of the largest refugee resettlements in recent history — more than 100,000 people from Burma, the country renamed Myanmar.

Roughly 6,000 to 7,000 have settled in Iowa, many of them secondary migrants who have arrived from other states looking for jobs, largely in meatpacking, manufacturing and food processing. The ethnically diverse group, which fled the world's longest-running civil war, is by no means the first to struggle since former Iowa Gov. Robert Ray opened the door to a wave of Southeast Asian refugees in 1975.

Nor are they the only group struggling now.

But numerous officials who work with refugees say the number of Burmese, as well as the scale of challenges they face — illiteracy, tremendous language barriers, post-traumatic stress and other mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence and poverty — may be the greatest that Iowa has ever confronted.

In Des Moines, Waterloo, Columbus Junction, Marshalltown, Storm Lake and other communities around the state, a mix of public and private organizations and churches has been trying to lasso more resources to better address the influx.

But many experts and policymakers say the resources and services available today, particularly in Des Moines, don't come close to meeting the needs.

"These people are doing some wonderful things, but they are seriously drowning," said state Sen. Janet Petersen, D-Des Moines. "These are by far the neediest refugees we have ever had. Many of them don't understand the concept of public schools and public education. They've never even had running water. Their needs are enormous."

Suicide rate climbs as problems mount

Many Burmese families don't have the language skills and cultural or technical know-how to navigate life in America. So they suffer in silence.

One sign of failure: At least nine suicides or suicide attempts — in Des Moines, Marshalltown and Columbus Junction — have been confirmed since 2011, those who work with the groups say.

The Rev. Benjamin Sang Bawi serves in Columbus Junction, a diverse southeast Iowa town. Before he arrived last year, he said, two refugees from the Chin ethnic minority group from Burma attempted suicide and another succeeded after jumping in the Iowa River.

On Good Friday, another man, a former Tyson Fresh Meats worker, slit his throat but survived.

In Des Moines, one woman attempted to stab herself to death "out of hopelessness and depression," said Henny Ohr, a lawyer and executive director of the Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center, or EMBARC, a refugee-run nonprofit that tried to help Way Moo last January. Another young man tried to poison and hang himself, she said.

Before that in Marshalltown, a young man slit his throat.

Mone Aye, the 25-year-old president of the EMBARC board, said she was called on to translate for that man, a meatpacker. She said he tried to kill himself because of financial difficulties. He had no family in Iowa and could speak no English, so Aye tried to help with doctor visits in Des Moines and Iowa City after he underwent a tracheotomy.

But Aye said she lost track of the man after she gave birth to her first child.

Not long after, she said, her own cousin, also in Marshalltown, had a breakdown over stress and family troubles, got drunk and ran his car into a traffic pole. He wound up in a mental health unit.

Before others started explaining what trauma can do, Aye said, "depression was not something known in my community."

Former Governor Ray's humanitarian leadership and firsthand accounts of life for refugees in camps in Thailand after the Vietnam War spurred an outpouring of goodwill by Iowans in the late 1970s and early 1980s that assisted the successful integration of thousands of Tai Dam, Vietnamese and southeast Asian refugees.

But back then, the state had more federal money, more case managers, more mental

health experts available and more housing and infrastructure, experts say. Today, the maze of public and private services available is full of gaps, Ohr and others say.

"We have this romantic notion of the days of Robert Ray and how great things were in Iowa," Ohr said. "It was great. But it's so different now."

Widow's pain lingers after husband's death

Mu Mu agreed to be interviewed because, she says, she never wants what happened to her husband to happen again.

This is how she describes their misfortune, through Tah Daw, another refugee from Burma who is called upon daily to translate for others in the Karen ethnic group. Karen is one of 27 languages spoken in Iowa by refugees from Burma.

Mu Mu and Way Moo met as schoolchildren at the remote Mae La refugee camp, the largest in Thailand, and married in the seventh grade.

Almost all of those in the camp were from southern Burma, displaced after the government's long clashes with minority ethnic groups.

The two had their first child, a daughter named Ju Aye, while living in bamboo huts in a camp without electricity or running water. Mu Mu recalls no authority or government officials at the camp, and no security "unless someone was killed."

After the U.S. Department of State approved the couple to come to the United States, they faced a three-month deadline to find work. Way Moo landed his first job, packaging food at Loffredo Fresh Produce on Des Moines' southwest side, and then became a meatpacker for Tyson Foods in Perry.

But after a year and a half of straining his small body, Way Moo began to have health troubles — numbness in his arms, a hernia, circulation problems — and had to resign in 2010.

Mu Mu went to work packing fruit at Loffredo, leaving her husband at home to take care of now 6-year-old Jobmu and 9-year-old Ju Aye.

Iowa Department of Human Services officials will not comment on specific child-abuse cases because they are confidential under state law. But a child abuse report shows a

complaint came in on Dec. 18, via a teacher who had seen a bruise on Jobmu's arm. A child protection worker at school interviewed the boy and his sister.

Ju Aye denied being disciplined at home, but Jobmu said he'd been slapped and hit on his butt.

The child told the worker both his parents "whipped" him with a coat hanger "one time on both his arms and feet" for misbehaving, according to a child abuse report.

After the abuse report, Mu Mu recalls, the child protection worker came to the door of the couple's two-bedroom apartment at River Hills on East Fifth Street near downtown Des Moines. Using an over-the-phone interpreter service, he explained to the couple the child abuse allegation.

"He told them it's going to be ongoing, that they would have to go to court. He said it was going to go step-by-step," Tah Daw explained on behalf of Mu Mu.

According to the DHS child abuse report, Way Moo eventually admitted he had hit the boy with a hanger. He said such discipline was commonplace when he was a child. He said he loved his son — he was just trying to get him to behave.

Both parents, the report said, thanked the investigator "for letting them know that their discipline was not appropriate and would like to know more about the rules in America."

But Mu Mu's recollection later was that the man was "very mean" and offered them no help.

The abuse report never led to a criminal investigation. But later in December, another DHS staffer came by, asking Way Moo and Mu Mu to sign a paper. She said she and her husband had no idea what the document contained, as the contents were not translated.

Mu Mu said she and her husband tried to tell the man that they were "a safe family."

"Way Moo was crying," Mu Mu said.

Back in Thailand, Mu Mu said, teachers hit children with sticks "for respect, to get you to be better. It's OK to do over there."

The DHS worker promised to be in touch.

DHS letter arrives as confusion reigns

Way Moo and Mu Mu didn't say a word about the child abuse report to anyone — until Jan. 10, when he received the letter DHS addressed to "Moo Way," Mu Mu says.

That's when he went to EMBARC and met Ohr and Dalia Kyi, a family advocate who helped translate.

The letter said the abuse allegation had been founded, or confirmed.

When Kyi translated the accompanying assessment, Way Moo insisted there were errors.

For one thing, the document reported violence between the parents. But he and Mu Mu disputed there was any domestic violence.

Amanda Rivera, a social work intern at EMBARC who helps the agency with high-risk cases, said DHS workers eventually asked EMBARC to help with the case, but not until after the case was confirmed.

She said when she joined a worker for a follow-up visit, Way Moo and Mu Mu seemed loving, cooperative and ready to do whatever was needed.

"The family was really open to having me and the worker there," she said. "They lived in a good-sized apartment. There was not a lot of furniture, but that's not unusual. The Burmese have concerns about bed bugs, and they are used to sitting on the floor."

Rivera said Way Moo seemed in good spirits, but worried about being able to work again.

"He kept saying ' If I'm on the child abuse registry, I can't get a job,' " she said.

It was apparent the couple did not understand the child abuse investigation was over, and they could do little about the founded abuse, Rivera said.

The DHS worker with Rivera had come only to offer the family services, as often happens in follow-up visits, Rivera said.

Mu Mu said she and her husband were told they needed to go to "school to learn on disciplining kids."

Since Mu Mu was working, Way Moo volunteered to go. But that class was not available yet, and he had no interpreter for it.

So the man suggested Way Moo sign up for English-as-a-second-language classes.

But then the DHS worker explained it would be hard for Way Moo to get a job because his name was being placed on Iowa's Child Abuse Registry, which employers use to screen workers.

"Way Moo was crying," Mu Mu said. "He felt like he had no opportunity anymore."

And that, Mu Mu says, is when she could see her husband begin to change.

"After that guy left," she said, "it felt like we couldn't breathe."

'I love you,' husband says in final goodbye

On the night of March 4, 5-year-old Jobmu became ill with a bad fever.

Mu Mu came home that night exhausted from work and fell asleep next to her husband, who was monitoring the boy.

Way Moo hadn't been sleeping, she says. He complained of high blood pressure. Neither of them had been able to eat much.

The next morning, Way Moo was supposed to go to his English class at a local church. He asked his wife if she could stay home to take the boy to a doctor.

Mu Mu left the apartment to go to her sister's building next door to ask for a ride.

She called Loffredo to say she couldn't come to work, then she called Way Moo.

"Are you going to school?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"I love you so much," Way Moo told his wife. "Take care of the children."

Mu Mu said her husband didn't sound right.

"Wait for me. I'm coming back," she told him.

"No," he said in Karen.

And then Mu Mu heard the phone drop.

She ran out of her sister's apartment building and up the steps next door.

When she got home, Way Moo was drawing his last breaths under the blanket, still hiding his wounds.

Public invited to community forum

Join Register columnist Lee Rood on Monday, June 22, at a special public forum to discuss the plight of Iowa's refugees from Burma.

Rood will moderate a panel that includes Henny Ohr, who heads the refugee-run nonprofit EMBARC; the Rev. John Kline, from Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church; and Carly Ross, director of the Des Moines field office of the U.S. Committee for Refugees; as well as members of the refugee community.

The forum will be at 7 p.m. in the Register's community room in Capital Square, 400 Locust St.

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