



Access to Safety Net Programs for North Carolina's Hmong Immigrant Families

Perspectives from Focus Group Participants

Diana Guespe, Hamutal Bernstein, Jennifer M. Haley, Sofia Hinojosa, Luis Gallardo, Hannah Gill, and Krista Perreira

An Urban Institute and UNC-Chapel Hill team conducted research in 2022 and 2023 to examine barriers to access to federal health and nutrition safety net programs like [Medicaid and SNAP](#) for eligible immigrants and members of mixed-status families in North Carolina and identify policies and practices that would reduce inequities.

We conducted 42 interviews with stakeholders from [HHS agencies, CBOs, refugee resettlement agencies, federally qualified health centers, and other immigrant-serving organizations](#) working statewide or in Catawba, Forsyth, Pitt, or Wake counties.

Four virtual focus groups were held in [Hmong, Spanish, and Swahili](#), and two virtual community listening sessions helped gather input from community stakeholders on research findings.

Creation of a [statewide data tool](#) provided county-level demographic data on immigrant families.

Over recent decades, North Carolina's diverse immigrant population has grown, with immigrant families living in rural and urban communities across the state.¹ This includes immigrant and refugee families from a diverse range of countries speaking many different languages. North Carolina has one of the largest² Hmong communities in the country, an ethnic minority group from Southeast Asia who arrived as refugees following the Vietnam War. Today, Hmong families in North Carolina often span three generations.

Immigrants face restrictions on eligibility for public benefits based on their immigration status. In addition, some immigrants forgo enrolling themselves or their children in safety net programs for which they qualify, such as Medicaid and nutritional benefits, which are administered by Health and Human Services (HHS) agencies at the county level. As a result, they and their families are at higher risk of food and health care insecurity.

A focus group held in June 2023 with five participants from the Hmong community in North Carolina primarily included adult children of Hmong immigrants, or second-generation Hmong. They shared their experiences helping their parents through the process of applying for safety net programs. Like other populations that include many refugees, Hmong immigrants often meet immigration eligibility requirements for federal safety net programs but must navigate income and other requirements. In the focus group, we heard that language access was a main barrier to accessing safety net programs. In addition, applicants' adult children, who were often tasked with finding safety net information, were overwhelmed with the information available online. Many lacked awareness of benefits and raised concerns about intergenerational living situations as a logistical hurdle to eligibility. Their recommendations to HHS for reducing these barriers include developing targeted modes of communication for the elderly, such as videos and radio, and using other modes, such as email and text, for the more technologically savvy younger population. They also suggested having eligibility instructions that address intergenerational families and hiring Hmong staff in county HHS agencies.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS FOR THE ELDERLY

Participants reported a lack of translated materials in Hmong, saying that they provide interpretation for their parents when interacting with county HHS offices. The majority tried to assist their parents through the process by translating information and completing forms on their behalf. But they lacked full Hmong fluency and were concerned that they would inadvertently misinterpret information shared by their parents or report incorrect information

in the application that would render their parents ineligible. They also expressed frustration at the lack of interpreters and Hmong staff at HHS offices, which caused their parents to feel intimidated.

I can understand Hmong, but I can't really speak it. So, to me the translation back to my parents when I'm trying to help them fill out an application ... can be very challenging.... I wish there were a way that it would be in a different language—in their language where they can read it and understand, because that's where we struggle.... The administration offices don't have representation of people who work there who speak our language, and so my parents ... feel intimidated to actually go.

LACK OF AWARENESS AND DIFFICULTIES NAVIGATING ONLINE INFORMATION FOR SECOND-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

The second-generation US-born adult children of Hmong immigrants reported their efforts to assist their parents included navigating HHS websites, sifting through information, and completing forms, but they found this task challenging, at times leaving them unsure of where to start. One participant reported when she called the HHS office, she had difficulties being connected with a person who could tell her about available benefits and programs.

INTERGENERATIONAL LIVING SITUATIONS COMPLICATE CONCERNS ABOUT ELIGIBILITY

One unique barrier raised by Hmong focus group participants compared with the Spanish-speaking and Congolese participants we talked with was intergenerational living situations. Three participants lived with or cared for their parents, and they worried that their parents would not qualify for safety net programs because of their children's income being considered as part of household income. One participant cared for her parents in her home and could not work. She had heard that North Carolina did not offer benefits for families in this situation and doubted her family's eligibility for food stamps.

A prominent issue among Spanish-speaking focus group participants focused on immigration concerns; they named specific policies such as “public charge” as a source of fear and barrier to safety net program enrollment. This, however, was not the case for the Hmong or Congolese focus group participants.³

SOLUTIONS RAISED

There should be a fair to talk about these kinds of benefits and have individuals who are knowledgeable and who can talk to our parents, or even me, on how to explain it or explain our condition, and our living situations in a way that will help us be better prepared to answer the questions.

Participants recommended HHS offices implement the following when serving the Hmong community:

- Hire Hmong speakers at HHS offices and train Hmong individuals to inform others in their community about safety net programs and help them navigate the application process.
- Implement modes of outreach and information based on individual preferences, such as videos, radio ads, outreach at fairs, and information in Hmong for the elderly and email and text reminders for the second generation.
- Provide clarification on family income requirements and instructions for intergenerational households so they can properly complete applications.

ADDITIONAL READING

Supporting North Carolina's Immigrant Families: Addressing Barriers and Promoting Solutions for a More Inclusive Safety Net

Hamutal Bernstein, Jennifer M. Haley, Diana Guelespe, Sofia Hinojosa, Luis Gallardo, Hannah Gill, and Krista Perreira [urban.is/3tBksPb](https://www.urban.org/3tBksPb)

¹ Krista M. Perreira and Lisa Carlson. 2023. *The Immigrant Community in North Carolina*. Chapel Hill, NC: Carolina Population Center.

² North Carolina Asian Americans Together. 2020. “Census.” Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Asian Americans Together.

³ Diana Guelespe, Hamutal Bernstein, Jennifer M. Haley, Sofia Hinojosa, Luis Gallardo, Hannah Gill, and Krista Perreira. 2023. “Access to Safety Net Programs for North Carolina's Congolese Immigrant Families: Perspectives from Focus Group Participants.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.