

Lao Minnesota

Lao Minnesotans arrived as refugees after 1975 and through later family reunification; Lao and Hmong are distinct peoples from the same country.

Maintained by: Equity and Inclusion Operations Consultant

Learning culture by making it

The Lao Arts and Culture Collective creates opportunities to learn through music, dance, storytelling, and crafts. Its culture camp brings these practices into shared learning in Minnesota. Cultural knowledge grows through participation as well as through reading about it.

- **Explore Lao arts and cultural learning** — <https://laoartsmn.org/programs/lao-culture-camp/>

A different starting point

How could a community partner help shape a gathering—not only translate an invitation after the plans are finished?

Community overview

Buddhist and Christian households; generations differ on language.

Names and terms

Lao

Also used: Laotian (national label)

Ask which language and how names appear on documents.

History and place

Origins and the Founding of a People

Lao peoplehood is older than the refugee file. The Kingdom of Lan Xang is literacy for the desk, not a speech: a Mekong state, Theravada Buddhism, Lao language and script. French colonial rule made a border and a school. Independence, the American war in Laos, and 1975 are the modern political sequence. They are not the origin of the people.

History for the meeting

Lao is related to Thai. Related is not interchangeable. A Thai interpreter is not the default. Isan (northeastern Thai) is a neighboring variety some families will name. Ask. Do not guess.

What people brought

Hmong people in Laos are a different people. Highland life, clan, and the CIA alliance are the Hmong page. Do not file Lao as the leftover of that war.

What people brought: Lao language, Theravada and phi, kinship, farming, and a memory of a state that changed hands. What they met in Minnesota: an English form, one “Asian” checkbox, and often a Hmong interpreter because the building already has that page.

The Geography of the Lao World

Homeland is Laos — Vientiane, Luang Prabang, the Mekong, the south, the places families name. Lao-speaking people also live in northeastern Thailand (Isan). A global diaspora: United States, France, Australia, Canada. Minnesota is one map, not the map.

Homeland

Compass (ACS 2019–2023): 71.6 percent Twin Cities, 28.4 percent Greater Minnesota. Greater Minnesota is not an afterthought. Do not assume Minneapolis. Do not assume Frogtown — that sentence belongs on the Hmong page unless this family lives there.

Minnesota

Do not assume the person in front of you has been to Laos. Secondary migration built parts of this map. Thai camps were exile geography, not home.

Minnesota and Lao History

This department will meet this community on waivers, child welfare, health care, cash, food, aging, and employment. Twin Cities 71.6 percent; Greater Minnesota 28.4 percent — not an afterthought.

Places

Partners: Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota historically; wats families name. Pay. Report back. CECLC is a door, not the whole community.

Partners

Public calendar: Lao New Year / Pi Mai in April; That Luang; Buddhist holy days. A calendar click is not community engagement. Guest at the wat. Shoes. Head. Altar.

Lao staff are not unpaid interpreters and not the community. Identity is not a staffing plan. A New Year visit is optional professional development. You are a guest. It does not make you the expert.

Culture and everyday life

People, place, and perspective

This brief is about Lao people as a people of Laos — the lowland Lao state history, the Mekong, Theravada wats — and as a Minnesota community counted by Compass as Lao (non-Hmong). This is not Hmong. If the household is Hmong, open Hmong Minnesota and put White Hmong or Mong Leng on the

interpreter line. If Lao, book Lao. Do not guess from the war.

Who this is

This is not a Census “Asian” mash. It is not Thai. It is not Khmer. It is not Vietnamese. Shared continent is not shared culture. The Secret War sits next door. The Hmong alliance with the CIA is a neighboring story, not this people as a footnote. A full mosaic is not a stereotype. A stereotype is when this page becomes the person in the lobby.

Who this is not

Minnesota Compass (ACS 2019–2023) puts Lao (non-Hmong) near 15,191. About 71.6 percent Twin Cities, 28.4 percent Greater Minnesota. About 21.9 percent age 17 or younger; 13.0 percent 65+. About 49.1 percent foreign-born. Language other than English (age 5+) 71.8 percent; English less than “very well” 36.1 percent. Date the number you use. A rate is not the person.

The diversity inside this people is the point. A person who came through the camps after 1975, a Christian family, a wat household that keeps phi, a U.S.-born nurse, a Greater Minnesota worker the building forgot, a college student who uses English with friends and Lao with an elder — share a people and do not share a Tuesday.

How to read this

Always defer to the person in front of you. This page is a hypothesis you still test on this family.

1975, the Pathet Lao, and the Camps — Foundational Event

The Secret War in Laos (1961–1975) is the foundational political event of Hmong Minnesota. It sits next door to this page. Lowland Lao people lived that war differently: a kingdom, a coalition, bombing, and then 1975. When the Pathet Lao took the country, royal and allied families, civil servants, and others fled. Camps. Resettlement.

Foundational events

Do not tell a Lao family the Hmong war story as if it were theirs. Do not tell a Hmong family this page is close enough. If the household is Hmong, open Hmong Minnesota.

Who you meet

The desk in 2026 meets the first wave and their children — U.S.-born, English-dominant with peers, still translating for parents, still unable to get Lao in a lobby that offered Hmong.

U.S. deportation of people with certain convictions is current structure for some Southeast Asian communities. Do not collect status you do not need. 1975 is not a personality.

Family

Households are often larger than a nuclear English form. Compass: average household size 3.31 (ACS 2019–2023). Elders, adult children, and obligation sit in the same week. Who cares for the child may not match the waiver checkbox.

Who is in the household

Ask who should be in the room. A nuclear English form already has a who.

Who speaks

This is not a Hmong clan system. Do not assume a clan last name. Family name is often last in U.S. files; ask order. Do not treat unmatched last names as fraud by default.

Women's labor and elder authority both live here. Both can be true in the same room.

Lao — the heart of a people

To be Lao in Minnesota is to be a people with a state, a language related to Thai, and a war file the building keeps mixing with Hmong. Face, elder obligation, the wat, and — in some rooms — phi travel into a waiver meeting. Harmony can look like agreement and then a plan nobody follows. Ask whether they agree. Do not take a smile as consent.

In this state

The U.S. racial checkbox that says Asian also holds Hmong, Chinese, and Indian histories they do not share. Filing Lao under Hmong because both came from Laos is how a closed door gets written.

This guide is a working orientation. Individual variation always supersedes group generalization.

Core Concepts

Lao language. Related to Thai — not a Thai interpreter by default. Not Hmong.

Wat

Theravada Buddhist temple as civic and ritual center for many. Do not make a monk the case plan unless this family asked.

Phi

Spirit practice in some households. Do not mash Hmong txiv neeb onto a Lao household. If they name a practice, listen. Do not book it as DHS programming.

Family name, not Hmong clan

Ask. Do not icebreak with a clan list from the other page.

1. Living memory in some rooms. Not a personality. Not an icebreaker.

Religion and Healing

Theravada Buddhism is central for many Lao Minnesota families. The wat is civic and ritual. Christianity lives in some families. Phi — spirit practice — lives in some households beside the wat. Do not mash Hmong household religion or a txiv neeb onto this page.

Streams

Do not make a monk the case plan unless this family asked. Do not treat Buddhism as decoration, and do

not treat church as the evolved version.

Practice

Shoes off at the wat and in many homes. The head is high; do not touch it. Feet are low; do not point them at an altar, a Buddha, or a person. You still keep medical and legal time.

Illness meaning may not be the DSM sentence. Ask. Co-create. Do not invent a rate.

Greetings

Elders first. Nop — palms together, slight bow, related to Thai wai — is ordinary in some rooms, especially with elders and at the wat. Many second-generation people will shake hands in English-language rooms. Follow this room.

Titles

Say the name. Ask.

This room

Do not import Hmong greeting rules, Somali right-hand rules, or the Black nod onto this page. This is not those grammars.

Physical contact: ask the room. Do not touch the head. Cross-gender touch with elders is not a default.

Naming Conventions

Family name is often last in U.S. files. Ask order. Do not assume a Hmong clan name. Lee, Vang, Yang on a file may be Hmong — if so, this is the wrong page. Lao names are not that list.

How to file

Given names may be Lao, Pali-Sanskrit Buddhist, English, or both. The form that demands first-middle-last and a hyphen will invent a person.

Ask how to say it and how to file it. Do not “correct” a mother and child who do not share a last name as a fraud signal until you have a reason.

Pronounce it. Ask. Do not joke about names.

Dates of Significance

Lao New Year / Pi Mai — mid-April, water festival in homeland practice, public at wats here. Guest, not researcher. A calendar click is not community engagement.

Calendar

That Luang festival — literacy for the desk as a national Buddhist moment in Laos. Minnesota rooms may or may not mark it. Ask.

Buddhist holy days vary. Christian calendars in some families. 1975 is literacy, not a holiday and not a speech.

Do not put “Asian holiday” or “Hmong New Year” on a Lao case note.

Etiquette

Shoes off in many homes and at the wat. Accept a little food if offered. Elders first. Head high, feet low. Do not point your feet at an altar or a person. Do not touch the head.

In the home

Do not walk into a living room and photograph the altar. Do not touch ritual objects. Do not treat a monk as a mascot.

Time

Hospitality is a virtue. You still keep medical and legal time.

On-time for appointments. Multi-household logistics are real. So is a courtesy-yes then no-show when the plan was never agreed. Ask whether they agree. Confirm in Lao if that is the language they use.

Language and Communication

Lao. Related to Thai — not a Thai interpreter by default. Not Hmong. An interpreter labeled Hmong, Thai, or Asian is a closed door for this household unless this family said otherwise.

Language

Compass: among those 5 and older, 71.8 percent speak a language other than English; 36.1 percent speak English less than “very well.” Date it. Lao script is not Thai script as a staffing plan. Confirm.

A long answer may be story. A short English yes may be exhaustion or courtesy. Do not take a smile as consent. Ask whether they agree with the plan.

Do not make a Lao coworker the interpreter. The child is not the interpreter. If the household is Hmong, stop and open the other door.

LGBTQ

Queer and trans Lao Minnesotans exist. Conservative family, wat, and church climates can mean silence or exile. Some people live a public English life and a private Lao life. You use the name they use. You do not out them to an elder as cultural humility.

This person

Minnesota’s Human Rights Act still applies. So does the duty not to treat a whole people as a family-values exhibit.

Do not use this chapter to raid a household. Do not pretend the tension is not there.

Hair, Dress, and Body

Traditional dress is public at Pi Mai and at the wat, not a daily uniform. Second generation looks like Minnesota. Do not ask a woman in clinic whether she “still wears the costume.” Do not mash Hmong New Year dress onto this page.

Dress

The head is high. Do not touch it. Sinh and silver are art and history, not a mascot for the unit's Heritage Month table.

Follow this person. Do not photograph monks as souvenirs.

Music

Lam, mor lam, the khene (reed mouth organ). Related to Thai Isan music. Not the Hmong qeej, even when the instrument looks cousin to a desk that has not studied. Buddhist chant at the wat. Pop in the second generation.

Variation

A playlist is not engagement. A funeral or wat rite is not staff entertainment.

Knowing that ritual music exists will stop you from talking over it as delay.

Sports

Soccer, volleyball, and ordinary school sport in the second generation. Do not assume the kid plays. Do not mash the Hmong Freedom Festival onto this page.

Not the whole person

Sport clubs are social infrastructure. They are not language access and not a case plan.

A tournament is not consultation.

Literature

Lao is a written language. Script and a literary tradition sit beside oral forms. Related to Thai is not interchangeable with Thai. This is not Hmong oral-first as a mash, and it is not a people without letters.

Literacy in the lobby

You do not need to quote a poem in the lobby. You need to know limited English is not illiteracy, and that the English form may still be a closed door.

Do not test an elder in English and call it capacity.

Art

That Luang is literacy for the desk, not a tourism poster. Buddhist art, weaving, wat architecture. Not paj ntaub. Not Angkor. Guest, not researcher.

Guest

A temple visit is optional professional development. It is not consultation.

Do not photograph monks or altars as souvenirs. Do not put a Hmong story cloth on a Lao Heritage Month table.

Conflict, War, and the State

French colonial rule, the American war in Laos, 1975 and the Pathet Lao, camps, resettlement, and later deportation climate for some — that is the political event on this page. The Secret War as Hmong alliance is next door. Do not steal it. Do not erase it. Open the right intelligence.

The badge

A DHS badge is not automatically help. Do not use 1975 as a personality. Do not ask a person to narrate war for your professional development.

Do not collect status you do not need. Do not treat fear as noncompliance.

Adjacent Peoples — Do Not Mash

Not Hmong. Not Thai. Not Khmer. Not Vietnamese. Not Chinese. Not “Asian American” as the file. Open the Hmong CI for Hmong — White Hmong or Mong Leng on the line. Open this for Lao. Some households are mixed. Ask this household.

Adjacent doors

Related to Thai is not a Thai interpreter by default. Camps in Thailand are exile geography, not a reason to file this family as Thai.

Never one Asian module. Never one “Laotian” mash that eats Hmong. Never one “Southeast Asian” interpreter.

Counts, Dated

Minnesota Compass, ACS 2019–2023, Lao (non-Hmong) cultural community: about 15,191; Twin Cities 71.6%; Greater Minnesota 28.4%; age 17 or younger 21.9%; 65+ 13.0%; foreign-born 49.1%; language other than English (age 5+) 71.8%; English less than “very well” 36.1%; high school or higher (25+) 76.5%; bachelor’s or higher 13.3%; median household income about \$71,800 (2022 dollars, averaged); poverty 6.3%; owner-occupied 59.1%; renter-occupied 40.9%; average household size 3.31; without health insurance 5.1%.

Counts

These numbers exclude Hmong. Date the number. Greater Minnesota at 28.4 percent is not an afterthought. A poverty rate of 6.3 percent is not proof the gates closed.

What the count is not

A 65-and-older share of 13.0 percent is older than some refugee communities on this spine. That is structure for aging and waiver work. A rate is not the person.

Doors and Sources

Minnesota Compass Lao (non-Hmong) profile (ACS 2019–2023). Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota historically. Wats this family names. Hmong Minnesota CI — only if this household is Hmong.

Public doors

CECLC is a door, not the whole community. An eList is not engagement. Pay partners. Report back.

Learn on your own time

Learn on your own time. Do not make a Lao colleague your unpaid tutor. Book a qualified Lao interpreter. The child is not the interpreter.

Services, opportunity, and participation

Education

Compass (ACS 2019–2023): among Lao (non-Hmong) Minnesotans 25 and older, about 76.5 percent high school or higher; about 13.3 percent bachelor's or higher. Among those 5 and older, 71.8 percent speak a language other than English; 36.1 percent speak English less than “very well.” Date the number.

School and language

A parent who speaks fluent Lao and limited English is not illiterate. The English-only IEP is the gate. Under-identification in schools is a pattern this desk should watch — do not invent a rate, and do not skip screening.

The child is not the interpreter. Book Lao, not Hmong. Second-generation educational mobility is real. So is a gap a room that treats everyone the same will call “culture.”

Other Considerations

Unvarnished, because Minnesota Nice is how a room that treats everyone the same deletes facts.

Named harms

War and camp trauma sit in some rooms. Under-identification in schools is a pattern to watch. Do not invent a rate. Do not skip screening. Do not mash Hmong late-autism findings onto this page without a source.

Do not file this household under Asian. Do not file it under Hmong. Those mash-ups are the first closed door.

Deportation climate for some people with records is current structure. It changes who opens the door. Do not collect status you do not need. Do not treat fear as noncompliance.

LGBTQ Lao Minnesotans exist. You use the name. You do not out someone to kin and call it culture.

Staff who share this community may add facts. They do not get to delete a fact because it is hard to say.

Health

War and camp trauma sit in the same clinics as U.S.-born children. Do not invent a Minnesota PTSD or autism rate for Lao households. Do not skip screening because you have no module. Under-identification in schools is the pattern to watch.

Access

Compass (ACS 2019–2023): about 5.1 percent without health insurance. A rate is not the person.

The wat, phi practice in some rooms, and biomedicine may all be in the household. If they name a healer or a monk, listen. Do not mash a Hmong txiv neeb onto this family. Do not make the monk the case plan unless they asked.

Gender match may be requested in maternal and intimate care. Offer it. Believe reported pain. Do not fold this history into a generic “Asian stoicism” slide.

Work, Markets, and Government

Factory, small business, professional second generation, public employment. Lao staff inside the department are not unpaid interpreters and not the community. Identity is not a staffing plan.

Work

Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota historically — pay, report back, do not BCC a cultural organization and call it consultation.

Staff

Relationship may precede a signature. That is not permission to skip a notice. It is a reason the first visit may not be the decision.

Health-care and Human-service Encounters

Lao versus Hmong is the first closed door. Book Lao, not Hmong, not Thai, not “Asian.” Who is in the room. Gender. A monk or phi in the story. English IEP. Deportation climate.

Language

Confirm Lao. Offer gender match. Ask who should hear. Do not make staff the interpreter. If they name a healer or a monk, listen. Do not mash txiv neeb. Mandated reporting still exists.

The meeting

Believe reported pain. The child is not the interpreter. Greater Minnesota is still this people.

Connections to human services

Workplace culture and service delivery are both candidates.

Language: Lao versus Hmong mixup is the first closed door. An interpreter labeled Hmong, Thai, or Asian is a closed door for a Lao household. Related to Thai is not a Thai default. Gender match may be requested in maternal and intimate care.

Names: do not assume a Hmong clan name. The database that flags unmatched last names as fraud is a gate.

Hour caps, exception processes, and life-sharing matches without language are not culturally neutral.

Child welfare and disability: under-identification in schools is a pattern to watch. Help-seeking that becomes a report is part of why people wait. Mandated reporting still exists. So does the duty not to treat a whole community as a risk score. Do not mash Hmong findings onto this page.

Greater Minnesota: 28.4 percent. A metro default is already a who.

Deportation climate: people skip clinic, school, and waiver meetings when a relative can be moved. That is not noncompliance. Do not collect status you do not need.

Notices and comment: an eList and an English PDF is not how this community was reached. Empty follow-up calls are theater.

Workforce: Lao staff are not the interpreter pool and not the community.

Legislation, funding, rule: you cannot advocate for a channel you will not study. This cultural intelligence exists so the 40% has a household in it — not a paternalistic program designed in a building that filed Lao under Hmong.

Practice considerations

'Laotian' on a form can mean Lao, Hmong, or other groups; book the actual language.

What to ask

- Lao interpreter, or a different language?
- Who should be in the room?

Access considerations

- Language, not nationality, on the request.
- Translated vital notices reviewed by a Lao speaker.

Who to involve

- Language access lead or interpreter services, with the dialect written on the request.
- Equity Director for the administration or the person responsible for the program.
- Community partner organizations identified in this brief, with a clear purpose, role, compensation, and plan to report back.

Assumptions to examine

- Do not assume Hmong and Lao are the same brief.

Continue the connection

- **Community engagement or co-design effort** — program page </paths/gp-3>
- **Equity Analysis Toolkit** — program page </learn/equity-toolkit>
- **Community engagement and connections** — program page </learn/community-connections>

- **Learning and resources** — program page /learn

Sources

- **Community self-description** — A community-informed source and representation review are still needed.