

Local Hmong leaders reconcile sour relationship with U.S. Attorney's Office

By Andrea Castillo The Fresno Bee

More than 100 people attended a friendship and reconciliation ceremony on Sunday between the U.S. Attorney's Office and the San Joaquin Valley Hmong community.

The ceremony, held at the Clovis Veterans Memorial Building, was put on by the [Hmong American Ad Hoc Committee](#) and the Merced nonprofit Healthy House. Among those in attendance were Benjamin Wagner, U.S. attorney for the eastern district of California, Jennifer Smith, deputy district attorney in Fresno County, and Assembly Member Adam Gray, D-Merced.

Paula Yang of Healthy House said the goal was to restore the relationship between the U.S. Attorney's Office and the Hmong community, which was shattered after the 2007 arrest of the late esteemed Hmong leader, Gen. Vang Pao.

Vang, who died in Clovis in 2011, was a key U.S. ally during the Vietnam War. But in 2007, federal authorities charged him and 10 others with [conspiring to violently overthrow communist Laos](#). Charges against Vang were dropped in 2009.

"This unfortunate event created a division between the Hmong community and the American leaders who the Hmong had considered to be allies," Yang said. "As the nation observes the 40th anniversary of the end of the tragic war in Vietnam, it is critical that this relationship be restored and clarified."

[Wagner](#) dismissed the charges against Vang after being appointed to the position in 2009.

"I understand and acknowledge that was a painful episode for the Hmong community," he said. "I'm not here to debate the case. I'm not here to apologize for it."

Wagner said the case wasn't about politics. He said the investigation began as a report about someone shopping for heavy weapons to send overseas.

"Like the war in Southeast Asia, this is an event we can put behind us and move forward," he said.

Hmong leaders presented Wagner an elaborate silver necklace as a symbol of friendship. He, the other lawmakers and the audience took part in a traditional Hmong "Baci" ceremony and blessing, in which they tied a thin cotton string around their wrists as a symbol of unity, respect and trust.

Johnson Lee, 20, attended the ceremony because his father was part of the string-tying blessing. His parents arrived in Fresno as refugees in 1991.

"I think it's important to know the history so you can acknowledge the differences (and) to understand how you got here," he said. "It makes you more humble."

The ceremony was timely. On Friday, Reps. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, and Paul Cook, R-Yucca Valley, reintroduced the [Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act](#), which would extend burial benefits in national cemeteries to Hmong and Lao Americans who fought beside the U.S. military during the Vietnam War.

Yang said an estimated 100,000 Hmong died during the war. She said the rift in relations emerged out of a perceived disregard by the American public of the Hmong contributions to the war. Vang's arrest caused more strain.

“We can get a lot accomplished working together,” she said. “We need to repair the broken bridges and build stronger relationships, especially for our children who are our leaders of the future.”

Andrea Castillo: [\(559\) 441-6279](tel:(559)441-6279), [@andreamcastillo](https://www.instagram.com/andreamcastillo)