

**MIGRANT INFORMATION CENTRE (Eastern Melbourne)
Multicultural Equity and Access Program**

Lao Cultural Profile

PLEASE NOTE: This profile provides an overview of some of the cultural information relating to the diverse groups of Laos-born people who live in the Eastern Region of Melbourne. This description may not apply to all people as individual experiences may vary. However this profile can be used as a guide to some of the issues that may concern your clients. This is an update of the profile in the Home and Personal Care Kit developed by the MIC in 2004.

Introduction:

Laos is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia surrounded by China, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. Laos is a mountainous country, especially in the North, represented by dense forest, high mountain ranges and the Mekong River which flows through the country and forms the boundary between Burma and Thailand.

There are over 9,000 Lao people currently living in Australia. Many of the Lao community arrived in Australia in the late 1970s and early 1980s as refugees from camps in Thailand (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).

Migration:

- The Lao community migrated to Australia as refugees following the dethroning of the old Royal Kingdom of Lan Xang in 1975 and its replacement by the communist regime known as the People's Democratic Republic of Laos.
- An ethnic minority known as the Hmong people also migrated during the period of 1975 to 1985.
- Students who came to Australia under the Colombo Plan Scheme during the 1960's and 1970's applied to remain in Australia as permanent residents.
- From 1985 to 1990, Lao people migrated mainly under the family reunion migration scheme from second and third countries such as France, Canada and the USA.

Local Demographics: Laos-born residents in the Eastern Region

Local Government Area	Total population	Total number of Laos-born people aged 65 and over	People aged 65+ as a % of the Laos-born population
City of Boroondara	36	0	0%
City of Knox	142	6	4%
City of Manningham	36	3	8%
City of Maroondah	27	0	0%
City of Monash	74	0	0%
City of Whitehorse	160	18	11%
Shire of Yarra Ranges	7	0	0%
Eastern Region	482	27	6%

(ABS Census 2006)

- There were 2,045 Lao people in Victoria at the last census (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).

- The median age of the Laos-born population is 42 years compared to 37 years for the total Victorian population (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).

Language:

- Lao refugees speak the old language from the Royal Kingdom of Lan Xang.
- There are more than 30 dialects in Laos. Lao and Hmong are the two predominant Lao dialects in Australia.
- English proficiency is low in the older Lao generation. Children often assist with interpreting support.
- 24.3% of the Lao population in Victoria identified as speaking English 'not-well' and 3.8% spoke English 'not at all' (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).
- 28.0% of the Lao population in Victoria assessed themselves as speaking English 'very well' and 33.3% as 'well' (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).

Religion:

The Lao population in Victoria identified as the following religions at the 2006 Census (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008):

- Buddhism - 76.2% (1,159)
- Western Catholic – 3.3% (68)
- Baptist – 1.5% (30)
- Ancestor Veneration – 1.1% (23)
- Animism – 0.7% (14)
- Other religions – 2.2% (46)
- No religion – 10.5% (215)
- A Buddhist shrine may be found in a Lao home. A small house or shrine on top of a column, called a spirit house (Phi) may be found outside. Lao people often make offerings of food to spirits. Flowers are often made as an offering to Phram. These offerings are symbols of Buddha's teachings.
- Lao Buddhists may wear images of Buddha around their neck or display images of Buddha in their homes. These images are there to remind Buddhists of the qualities of the perfect wisdom and the perfect compassion of Buddha. They serve to inspire Buddhists to develop these qualities. Some Lao people may wear amulets for protection against evil spirits.

Attitudes and Issues with Ageing:

- Low English levels and low literacy levels can make it difficult for older Lao people to understand information about services. Lao people may lack knowledge of Australian social support systems for health and aged care.
- A profound belief in their own culture makes older Lao people reluctant to change and to adapt to their new environment; this can lead to intergenerational conflict with their children and grandchildren.
- Transportation is often an issue for older Lao people, particularly when all the adults in a family are working.
- There may be some cross cultural issues for Lao people. Older Lao people can feel that a service is not culturally appropriate and does not address their needs.

Attitudes to Disability and Mental Illness:

- Lao Buddhists believe that many aspects of illness and disease are a result of one's actions in the past and current life (Bad Karma). Good deeds, thoughts and words result in good Karma whereas bad Karma is a result of impure thoughts, words and bad deeds.
- Mental illness may be attributed to spiritual conflict or spirit loss.

Customs / Values:

- Lao people believe in honouring and respecting 'elders'. Elders are perceived as 'the one with the wisdom of life' who gave life to their children.
- Older Lao people and their families also maintain the cultural tradition in caring for their elderly parents.
- A respect for individuals, families, and the culture is critical to the Lao community.
- The extended family is the central social unit within the Lao community. Traditionally the society is patriarchal in structure.
- Privacy is an important cultural value. Relationships are based on trust and personal questions from people they don't know very well are not appreciated.
- Lao people may ask visitors to their home to remove their hats / shoes. Many homes will have both a mat and chairs on the floor for sitting. If an older person is sitting on the floor it is generally considered impolite for the visitor to sit in a chair.
- Modesty is highly valued.

Communication Styles:

- Lao people tend to be reserved in most social and professional contacts.
- Lao people do not value demonstrative or loud expressions of feelings.
- Laos-born people do not like to be touched on the head as it is considered offensive. It is also considered impolite to point one's foot at another person.
- The traditional Lao greeting is called 'wai'. This involves placing your palms together at chest level as if praying and inclining the head. Western greetings are well accepted.
- In conversation with Lao people it is important to address the head of the family first (usually the husband or senior male member of the family) before speaking directly with other family members.
- Lao people don't appreciate it if visitors appear in a hurry.

Naming Conventions:

- Lao people write their first name before their surname.

Health Beliefs and Practices:

- In general, Laos-born people who are unwell will seek assistance from the family and/or community before visiting a western health professional.
- Most elderly Lao people may prefer traditional or herbal remedies.
- Traditional treatments such as coining, cupping or pinching may be tried first. This can result in bruises or marks on the forehead, the abdomen, the base of the nose, between the eyes, and on the neck, or chest. It is important not to mistake these marks as a sign of abuse.

Greetings:

English Greeting	Lao	Closest English Pronunciation
Hello	sabai di	SA-BY-DEE
Goodbye	phôp khan mai (till we meet again)	POB KAN MAII
Yes	tiao (formal) / euh (coll.), dai (can do)	TIAO, UH, DIE, DOYH
No	bo	BO
Thankyou	khob chai (deu)	KHOB JAY

Key Lao Festivals / Significant Dates:

- Makha Boosa (Monks and believers gather to pay respect to Buddha) *February*
- Pimay Lao (New Year) *13th – 15th April*

Families gather to wish each other well and to pay respect to living elders, called 'Somma.

- Vissakha Boosa *May*

The celebration of the birth, The Enlightenment and the Death of Buddha

- Ho Khao Padabdin & Ho Khao Slak *September & October*

Lao people arrange offering ceremonies at the temples and pray for their deceased elders to be reborn into the next life.

- Boun That Luang *December*

The Luang temple is an important symbol for Lao people; the stupa-temple is believed to hold the ashes of Buddha.

* For other significant dates related to religious observances, refer to the Buddhist religious profile.

* To search for exact dates of key cultural and religious events, festivals and national days for this year, visit: <http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/a-diverse-australia/calendar-australia/>

Local services useful for Lao residents in the Eastern Region

Settlement Services

Provide information, referral and casework for refugees and family migrants who arrived in the last five years.

Name	Address	Contact
Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne)	Suite 2, Town Hall Hub, 27 Bank Street, Box Hill, 3128	Ph: 9285 4888
New Hope Migrant and Refugee Centre	18 Chester Street Oakleigh, 3166	Ph: 9563 4130

Aged Care & Disability Support Services and Community Support Services

Lao Planned Activity Group (Core)

Name of Organisation & Contact Details	Venue	Time / Day
Lao Elderly Association Inc. 700 Maroondah Hwy, Mitcham 3132 Ph: 9873 2267	700 Maroondah Hwy, Mitcham 3132	Every Monday Targets Eastern Region of Melbourne

Lao Australian Welfare Association

Address: PO Box 223, Forest Hill, 3131

Ph: 9894 3744

Lao Australian Welfare Association advocates for the interests of the Lao community in Victoria. It also provides a broad range of social, welfare and community services to its members.

Lao Elderly Association Inc.

Address: 700 Maroondah Hwy, Mitcham, 3132

Ph: 9873 2267

Lao Elderly Association provides aged and disability support services which include friendly home visits, planned activity groups, social functions and excursions, access and referrals into mainstream services, provision of transport, language assistance, caring for carers and services supported by volunteers.

Migrant Information Centre Aged Care & Disability Services

Address: Suite 2, Town Hall Hub, 27 Bank Street, Box Hill, 3128

Ph: 9275 6905

The aged and disability team aims to increase access to aged care and disability services for CALD communities in the EMR through working with CALD communities to promote those services, provide information and referral and supporting organisations to provide culturally appropriate care. The team also receives funding for specific projects in this area.

References:

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Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2008, *The Laos-Born Community in Victoria*, Fact Sheet No. A-37, viewed 20 April 2010, <<http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/images/stories/pdf/laosfs-24apr08.pdf>>.