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## **Considerations for Individuals and Agencies working with the Karen people of Burma in the United States**

*KACF is very grateful for all the people working to help Karen people to acculturate to life in the United States. Please consider the following points when helping and working with Karen refugee arrivals.*

### **Translators and Case Workers Should be Fluent in Karen Language**

- Karen is a totally different language group than Burmese. They are not a dialect of each other so one should not assume that Karen will generally understand Burmese. Many do not.
- Although many Karen may speak a little Burmese, it is critical that you have a fluent Karen speaking translator. As an outsider you may see the Karen and Burmese person communicate, but note that this does not mean they can communicate about meaningful issues. This may be superficial conversation due to the Burmese person's limited ability to speak Karen and the Karen person's limited ability to speak Burmese.
- It is likely that a Karen person will not report or tell you that the translator does not speak Karen well or enough, as we do not want to get the Burmese person in trouble or fired for fear of retribution or troubling the person. It is also unlikely that we will tell you our Burmese is not good enough to understand a Burmese speaking translator or case worker.

**Example:** There was a case where a Burmese translator was unable to speak Karen resulting in a doctor mistreating a Karen child in the emergency room, nearly killing him.

### ***How KACF can Help***

If you would like KACF to interview a potential translator to assure that they are fluent in Karen, please contact us and one of our Karen Board members will interview them and make a recommendation to you.

KACF can also circulate a request for translators through our national network of Karen if you have trouble finding a translator / case worker in your city.

There are also translation companies that will do phone translations in Karen. Finally, ***in an emergency***, if you cannot find a Karen speaker, you can contact us to translate by telephone.

## **“Burmese” and “Karen” People are not the Same**

- Do not assume that if you have found a Burmese person (or case worker) in your community that you have found a friend or ally of a Karen person.
- “Burmese” refers to people of Burma; they could be any ethnic group or the dominant ethnic group named “Burman.” Historically Karen do not trust Burmans as a result of abuses by Burman soldiers and a Burman dominated government that sought to oppress them. Karen are refugees because they could prove persecution by Burman soldiers or officials. This mistrust continues into the present. Bringing a Burman person to translate or be a mentor for a Karen will likely be treated with mistrust until the Karen person can assess the intent of the person. Some Karen may not be open to making such an assessment and will not engage in meaningful relationships, partnership, or working relationships with Burmans; the reverse may also be true.
- Without this trust between a Burman case worker and a Karen refugee, the Karen person may feel agencies are putting them in a situation where you are forcing us to accept desperately needed help from someone we don’t trust or are afraid of. This may result in Karen reluctance to seek help in important issues like going to the doctor, getting social services, or worse, being forced to rely on someone we fear, could retraumatize us.
- For more information on the history of the Karen, see [www.karenkonection.org](http://www.karenkonection.org); for more information on the human rights situation see [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org)

**Examples:** A Karen family was placed in group housing with several Burman families. They were so scared they would not leave their room or let the children play in common areas. They reported discrimination and threats of violence by the Burman family, but feel they have no other options. In another example a Burman was asked to accompany a mentally ill (and paranoid) Karen man to see a psychologist. The Karen man was terrified that he was being taken to be abused, because a Burman was escorting him.

### ***How KACF can help***

If you would like to discuss these issues further, please contact KACF and we can help you find trusted resources in your community through our community network or to strategize on your options given your specific situation and limitations.

## **Do Not Depend on Karen People to Complain or Let You Know if They Have a Problem**

- Karen people are extremely polite, considerate and deferential; this is even more important to those we perceive to have higher status. By virtue of being older, male, American, white etc. you are of higher status. A Karen person does not want you to lose face by complaining about your help or to be seen as ungrateful for the aid they are getting by complaining. We also worry about burdening you with requests. The word to describe this cultural norm is “annade.” “Annade” is best described as “I feel really bad that you have to go out of your way to do something for me”. Furthermore, we feel we are at the mercy of those who know more. We do

not want to antagonize or alienate the one person or resource that we depend on—for example the case worker. Not understanding our rights, not coming from a culture where individual rights are central, many Karen arrivals are unlikely to tell you if something is wrong unless it is extremely serious.

- To address this cultural norm, make consistent inquiries to the person or community in question, including through a trusted ***Karen speaking*** third party to find out what problems and challenges they are facing. You may need to ask several times over a longer period of time and in different ways. Use open question and avoid leading questions so you don't end up with the answer hidden in your question. Many Karen will try to give you the answer they think you want to hear. *To be polite, respectful and (therefore) agreeable is more important than being accurate or stating your needs—even if your needs are critical.* Conversations, as all other interactions, are not just for communicating facts, but communicating respect. Communicating through a Karen speaking or trusted third party helps to avoid confrontation and will much more likely get you the truth.

**Examples:** There have been numerous tragic examples of Karen people waiting to ask for help or complain until the situation was very serious and sometimes, too late. One woman who was diagnosed with cancer while she was still a refugee, politely waited for her Medicaid card to come in, making informal inquiries with her case worker. After three months of waiting her cancer had spread and her diagnosis was dire. There have been cases where women were sexually abused by a case worker repetitively before complaining. There have numerous been cases where new arrivals had no food for days and did not complain to the agency, but were begging for food from neighbors.

### ***How KACF can help***

Please feel free to contact us if you suspect there is a problem and want one of our Karen board members or community volunteers to make an inquiry with a person or family. We are also prepared to make visits to talk to the Karen Community and act as a third party that can collect information through “listening exercises” and report problems back to you. We are also available to act as external monitors and evaluators, providing confidential assessments.

### **Do not assume that newly arrived Karen people know how to do “normal” daily tasks.**

- This includes things like take a bus, read signs in any language including their own, read transportation maps, understand or respond to their mail, understand the urgency of responding to calls, filling out forms, updating documents, and dealing with dates and numbers—to name a few. It helps to remember that in a typical day in the life of a Karen who is a farmer, time, dates and figures do not register as a high priority. What IS a high priority is rice planting season and harvest time and these do not have exact dates. Typically if you ask a Karen mother the age of her child, the answer will be based on the season and the lunar month, for example “sometime after the waning moon during the rice harvest.”

**Example:** A case worker left Karen people at a social service office expecting them to be able to find their way home. Not knowing how to get home, they sought shelter in the snow between trash dumpsters until police were called to assist them. There have been

several cases where Karen got lost in their city or on the bus system for days, not knowing how to get home and putting themselves in danger.

***How KACF can help***

If you have questions about what to expect or how to address particular challenges, please call us. We are also happy to advise on the content of cultural orientations. Also see KACF document “*Recommendations to Resettlement Agencies for Limiting Harm to Karen Refugees from Burma*” on our website under “resources.”

*This document was created by the Karen American Communities Foundation and its Karen eleven member Board of Directors. We are an organization composed of volunteers. For more information contact Veronika Martin, Executive Director at 202-550-3199 or Steve Dun, President of the Board at 206- 295-8553.*