

In Low-Voting San Diego Neighborhood, Refugee Groups Want 100 Percent Turnout



Paw Say calls Karen refugees to remind them to register to vote, May 12, 2016. (*Kris Arciaga/KPBS*)

The City Heights neighborhood has historically [had the lowest voter turnout in San Diego](#), but some refugees are bucking that trend by pushing for all of the eligible voters in their communities to cast ballots.

Most of the refugees who resettle in San Diego live in City Heights. There are Vietnamese, Somali, Iraqi and Burmese communities in the neighborhood, [where 47 percent of the residents are foreign-born](#) and just 6 percent are white.

San Diego nonprofits such as the [Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans](#) and the Environmental Health Coalition have been holding events and voter turnout drives this campaign season [specifically geared toward refugees](#). Some San Diego City Council candidates also have staff members focused on reaching specific refugee communities.

The Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans has found that once refugees begin voting, [they become “supervoters.”](#) and rarely miss an election. The group’s survey of refugees in San Diego showed 75 percent show up for all elections, not just presidential ones. Though statewide data on refugee voter turnout doesn’t exist, the voter analysis firm [Political Data Inc.](#) estimates 13 percent of California’s foreign-born voters are supervoters.

For some refugees, California's June 7 primary will be the first time voting in their lives.

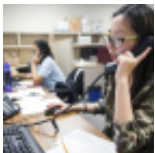
Paw Say, 21, moved to the United States seven years ago from a refugee camp on the Thailand-Myanmar border. She's now a U.S. citizen with the right to vote.

"In Burma, back then, there's no voting and no opportunity to have your voice heard," she said, calling Myanmar by its former name, Burma. "We can finally have the voice to speak up and have the freedom to speak our mind because in Burma there's no such thing."

Paw Say talks with her grandmother in their City Heights apartment, May 27, 2016. *(Nicholas McVicker/KPBS)*

Paw Say is studying early childhood development at San Diego State University and lives in a two-bedroom City Heights apartment with her grandmother, brother and sister. Her parents died before she moved to the U.S.

With her finals over, Paw Say spent a recent Friday morning with her grandmother. Family portraits shot in a mall photo studio hang on the wall next to the flag of Karen State, a territory that has been in a civil war with Myanmar since 1948. More than 100,000 Karen people, including Paw Say's family, fled that conflict to Thai refugee camps, where they had hoped to then be resettled.



The U.S. doesn't keep track specifically of Karen refugees, instead grouping them with Burmese. In recent years, the U.S. has accepted more Burmese refugees than refugees from any other country — almost 150,000 since 2006. San Diego has about 1,700 Karen refugees and California about 4,400.

As a new voting American, Paw Say falls in the undecided camp when it comes to the Democratic presidential primary. She favors Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders over former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton but hasn't made up her mind. But she's ready for her first voting experience, and has been working to ensure all of the eligible Karen refugees in San Diego show up to the polls by helping them register and understand their ballots.

"It's their time to shine," she said. "In the refugee camp, they don't really have a voice, and in Burma they don't really have a voice. But now they have the freedom to speak up for the country and their community and their family."

California is home to more than 825,000 refugees. They can become U.S. citizens after five years and begin to vote.





On a recent Sunday at the [San Diego Living Water Church](#) in City Heights, another group was getting ready to fill in ballots. The church's congregation is mostly Vietnamese. Some came to the U.S. as refugees after the Vietnam War ended in 1975.

When the church service wrapped up, congregants gathered in a back room for watermelon and sticky rice — and also to vote.

An organizer asked everyone who'd brought a ballot to hold it up, and immediately the room was filled with waving pieces of paper.

Most of the ballots were in Vietnamese, and people helped each other understand how to fill them in. The church's pastor also brought his laptop and registered people to vote.

Sophie Tran, 81, said she's been calling her community members, reminding them to vote this year. She tells them it's their responsibility.

"If we have a big voice together with the community and we vote for somebody we trust, then our voice will be heard," Tran said. "Because if not, then it cannot be heard. If you don't vote, nobody hears you."

Tran has been in the U.S. for 41 years after arriving as a refugee when the Vietnam War ended. She also now works on voter outreach with new refugee groups, like the Karen from Myanmar. She tells them voting is part of being an American.

"We have to cooperate with the people that claimed us and welcomed us to this country. And we have to show our respect to them, our responsibility to them," she said.

This story is part of California Counts, a collaboration of KPBS, KPCC, KQED and Capital Public Radio to report on the 2016 election. The coverage focuses on major issues and solicits diverse voices on what's

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