



Showcasing Solutions

CULTURE HELPS BUILD STRONG HMOOB YOUTH

The Problem

Young HMoob people in the La Crosse area face two challenges – connecting to their culture through language and ease in discussing their mental health.

These young people are interested in learning more about their history, culture, and, in particular their language. However, they face a barrier in learning the language – since the Hmong language isn't spoken much in their homes, they don't speak it well, if at all, and there is a concern that the language is dying.

They also face challenges in discussing their mental health. Many have not been in settings where the topic is discussed so their understanding of feelings and mental health, as well as their comfort level in talking about it, is low.

The Solution

Cia Siab, Inc. is a non-profit in La Crosse that focuses on building a culturally vibrant HMoob community, especially for youth, elders, women, and LGBTQ+. Culture and language is at the center of their work.

Their youth programming is designed to build self-esteem, reinforce positive cultural identity, and encourage youth to create a better, less violent, and equitable world. "We are focused on culturally-specific services that help youth, and their families, engage in the context of their culture, affirming that their culture matters," said Meenan Yang, Youth Advocate at Cia Siab.

The youth program meets weekly and serves 30-35 young people grades 6-12. A typical program involves picking the youth up at school and all sharing a Hmong meal once they arrive at Cia Siab. That is followed by the opening circle where each youth speaks their name, pronouns, and parents' name in Hmong (as much as they are able) and then answers an ice breaker. The formal program follows, and that can include guest speakers and topics such as mental health, teen dating violence, and acknowledging their HMoob culture. The program wraps up with clean-up and then driving the youth home.



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Mental health has been woven into youth discussions. "Many of our youth have challenges in discussing mental health," said Yang. "So, we have defined what we mean by mental health and focus on creating a space where the youth feel safe and are willing to open up."

Cia Siab also offers a HMoob Language and Culture Camp for youth in middle and high school. This is a full language immersion camp where youth learn HMoob history and engage in outdoor activities that relate to HMoob ways of life.

In connecting youth to culture, Cia Siab brings youth and elders together. Elders share their stories. A favorite history connection for the youth is elders sharing their traditional HMoob toys and activities they did as young children. Another cultural connection Cia Siab is working on is gardening and having youth learn about HMoob crops and traditional gardening tools.

The Results

A lot of youth Cia Siab sees have stated they love their HMoob identity and want to learn the language. "The youth who attend camp are learning to read Hmong and are learning the language and the vowels," said Yang. "They are speaking in simple sentences during our opening circles, and this is very exciting for us who value our culture so much."