



Boat People SOS: From Rescue at Sea to Katrina Relief

by Thang Nguyen and Julie Nguyen

This dynamic nonprofit—formed to rescue and resettle Vietnamese refugees—continues to transform itself, recently providing relief to thousands of Vietnamese-Americans in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Formed in 1980 to respond to the needs of the first wave of Vietnamese refugees, Boat People SOS (BPSOS) has provided relief, assistance, and support to these and subsequent immigrants in search of freedom and a dignified life. The organization began by performing rescue-at-sea missions in partnership with international organizations, pulling more than 3,300 Vietnamese boat people from the South China Sea, and has expanded to help a broader refugee population through community programs and political advocacy.

Vietnamese Resettlement

In coming to our shores, Vietnamese refugees brought with them four thousand years of tradition, a vibrant culture, and a rich treasure of personal stories that unfortunately have been neglected as worthy topics of study and sharing. The refugees themselves have been preoccupied with survival and integration.

The Vietnamese-American experience started with the bitter end of the Vietnam War, in which 58,000 Americans and some 500,000 South Vietnamese gave their lives. The first Vietnamese refugees started to arrive in the United States in the latter part of 1975, causing a new community to spring to life practically overnight. Since then, the Vietnamese-American population has grown to approximately 1.5 million, becoming part of the economic, cultural, and social fabric of America.

The resettlement pattern of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants is complex. The initial influx of refugees consisted primarily of highly educated Vietnamese who had fought alongside the Americans during the Vietnam War. Some 130,000 of these first refugees were evacuated along with U.S. personnel in April 1975 as the communists advanced toward Saigon.

Between 1978 and 1985, the first wave of boat people—South Vietnamese who could not escape in 1975—fled communist Vietnam, seeking freedom on flimsy vessels. After a few months in refugee camps in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong, many were recognized as refugees and brought to the United States. From 1988 to 1992, the second wave of Vietnamese boat people came to America after languishing for years in refugee camps. These new arrivals tended to have a lower level of education, spoke little English, and possessed limited entrepreneurial skills.



From 1990 to 1996, the vast majority of refugees and immigrants from Vietnam were torture survivors and Amerasians. After taking power, the communist regime sent more than a million South Vietnamese allies of the United States to “re-education” camps—a cross between Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags. Tens of thousands died because of illnesses, malnutrition, torture, and execution. Those who survived were physically and mentally broken. They form arguably the most neurologically impaired group of refugees ever resettled to this country. Amerasians are children of U.S.

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servicemen and Vietnamese women. Left behind after the war, they were considered children of the enemy and were severely persecuted by the communist regime. Most of them were denied education and are therefore illiterate in both Vietnamese and English.

BPSOS Transformation

In response to major shifts in U.S. and international policies toward Vietnamese boat people, BPSOS moved its headquarters in 1990 from San Diego, California, to Northern Virginia and concentrated on policy advocacy (see box) and casework. Since then, the nonprofit has assisted about 1,500 refugee families in their asylum claims. The organization also coinitiated the Vietnamese Refugee Private Sponsorship/Canada program to resettle 300 refugees to Canada. In 1991, BPSOS created Legal Assistance for Vietnamese Asylum Seekers (LAVAS) to send pro bono lawyers and paralegals to help thousands of Vietnamese boat people in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong in their refugee claims.

Advocacy

BPSOS effectively uses advocacy to promote social justice, defend human rights, and protect human dignity. More than 18,000 former boat people came to the United States as a result of the BPSOS LAVAS initiative of the early 1990s. After six or seven years of incarceration in Southeast Asian and Hong Kong camps, they had been deemed “economic migrants” and returned to Vietnam. Through casework and advocacy, BPSOS convinced both the U.S. Congress and Clinton administration that many victims of persecution had been erroneously repatriated. The U.S. government later interviewed a number of these returnees, found them to be refugees, and admitted them to the United States.

This latest group of Vietnamese refugees is still struggling to rebuild their lives and find their places in their new homeland. As a result of the BPSOS advocacy effort that started in 1997, the United States recently resumed the resettlement of torture survivors from Vietnam. So far, several hundred have arrived in the United States with their family members; several thousand are expected in the next two years. Since 2001, BPSOS has also advocated the automatic recognition of Amerasians—who continue to be treated as aliens in this country—as U.S. citizens.

BPSOS participates in a series of congressional hearings hosted by the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. Topics cover critical areas such as disaster mitigation, language and cultural barriers, housing, and health care access. In collaboration with other national Vietnamese organizations and the Asian American Justice Center, BPSOS is a voice for the tens of thousands of Asian Pacific Americans affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

By mid 1996, almost all Vietnamese boat people had been either resettled or repatriated, and the camps that once housed them had been closed. BPSOS shifted its focus to helping the Vietnamese-American community nationwide cope with the effects of welfare and immigration reforms. Its new mission is to enable the most underserved, disenfranchised, and marginalized to pursue their dream of living in full liberty and dignity. Addressing the needs of the different waves of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants, BPSOS has a vision for the future:

- ◆ Victims of persecution, exploitation, and violence will receive protection and will realize their dreams of living lives in liberty and dignity.
- ◆ Vietnamese refugees and immigrants will be able to meet their own needs, influence and affect policies, and serve others.
- ◆ Vietnamese refugees and immigrants will participate in and contribute to their communities.



Capitalizing on the vast network of grassroots support developed over the years, BPSOS embarked on developing domestic programs and building capacity for local communities (see box). It rapidly grew into a national organization comprising 16 branch offices; its programs now serve 10,000 clients a year, including many non-Vietnamese. This variety of programs is designed to create a web of services to address the intertwining and compounding effects of unmet needs on refugee families. “We recognize the need of refugees, not only to build a new life, but also to reconstruct the family with effective community support,” explained Khanh Tran, community development director of BPSOS.

Community Development

In 1998, BPSOS piloted a new initiative: building capacity for the Vietnamese-American community one organization at a time. They have since helped in the formation of a dozen self-help groups of torture survivors, seniors, and older women; mentored fifty grassroots organizations; and secured \$2 million for faith- and community-based organizations throughout the nation. Beneficiaries of this initiative are scattered around the map, including Hope Community Services in Orange County, California, Tuong Van Monastery in Northern Virginia, the Asian Social Service Center in Philadelphia, the Bo De Buddhist Temple in New Orleans, the Vietnamese-American Cultural and Educational Center in Camden, New Jersey, and the Vietnamese Culture and Science Association in Houston.

Since 2001, BPSOS has invested almost \$1 million to develop a vast and growing network of Vietnamese-language mass communications, covering print, radio, television, and direct mailing. *Mach Song (Life Stream)*, a Vietnamese-English monthly publication, distributes 30,000 in 16 cities. The organization’s radio program broadcasts two hours daily in Atlanta and twice weekly in eleven cities nationwide. *Mach Song Television*, running two hours a day, debuted in May 2006 on Vietnam Public Television. The organization’s direct mail reaches 10,000 families across the country. All in all, BPSOS mass communications cover one-fourth of the total Vietnamese-American households nationwide, and it wants to reach one-half by 2008.

The organization’s effectiveness comes mainly from its ability to mobilize volunteers—Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese—and from the programmatic experiences and operational expertise it has developed in the past two decades. It has established new programs to assist local community members, from tutoring to tax clinics, homeownership workshops to health fairs, counselling to computer literacy, and many other human services. Most BPSOS programs are family- and community-centered and serve as gateways to the wide spectrum of services offered at BPSOS and partnering service agencies.

BPSOS is a recognized leader in many areas of service. Its survivor services program currently helps more than one-fourth of all certified victims of human trafficking in the United States. BPSOS operates the only centers for Vietnamese torture survivors in the world. The



organization is a national champion for Vietnamese victims of domestic violence. It is the only Asian-American organization certified to train workers on U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards.

Hurricane Katrina Relief

After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, more than 15,000 Vietnamese-American evacuees arrived in the Houston area, and thousands of Vietnamese families were left homeless in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, and East Biloxi, Mississippi. A few weeks later, thousands more arrived from Port Arthur and Beaumont, Texas, fleeing Hurricane Rita. BPSOS again moved into action, summoning its experience at rescuing the boat people at sea and administering relief in the refugee camps.

BPSOS provided immediate direct relief aid to the evacuees from New Orleans, Biloxi, and Port Arthur at its Houston branch office. With a limited staff and hundreds of community volunteers, BPSOS and local partners provided immediate counselling and connected thousands of evacuees with public services. BPSOS funded this operation with donations from community members across the country and a generous grant from Freddie Mac.

In response to requests for assistance from more than 250 families (mainly Vietnamese but also Cambodian and Laotian), BPSOS opened an emergency office in Bayou La Batre in October 2005. This community comprises many recent arrivals to the United States—most with limited English skills and little understanding of the U.S. legal and social system. Understandably, they have been very slow to access federal assistance due to language barriers and an unfamiliarity with the disaster relief system. In late December 2005, BPSOS followed the evacuees as they returned

home to New Orleans; its operation in New Orleans now has 13 staff members providing case management and certain specialized services to some 900 families. In March 2006, BPSOS established offices in East Biloxi and New Orleans, followed by a satellite office in Port Arthur.

Like other victims of the hurricanes, the Vietnamese have lost their loved ones, homes, jobs, and possessions, as well as their entire community support system. But being out of reach of federal, state, and local governments as well as mainstream charities, they face far greater challenges. Since BPSOS launched its Katrina relief efforts, it has worked through four different channels—case management, advocacy, linguistic and cultural competency training, and emergency preparedness.

National Case Management Consortium

The Katrina Aid Today (KAT) National Case Management Consortium is run through the United Methodist Committee On Relief and funded by foreign donations channelled through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. BPSOS is one of the nine national partners working on KAT. Through this consortium, BPSOS has case managers in eight national locations, who provide assistance on financial aid and planning, home placement and rebuilding, benefits restoration, emergency assistance, legal assistance, and skills training and job search. The BPSOS KAT case managers are accessible to Katrina survivors through a toll-free national case management hotline. “We have deployed thirty-two full-time case managers to the region; our goal is to assist seven thousand Asian households,” explains Bao Le, Houston-based program manager for the BPSOS Katrina disaster relief and recovery program.





American Red Cross

Meanwhile, the American Red Cross's efforts to reach and serve the thirty thousand Vietnamese-Americans affected by Katrina are facilitated through BPSOS specialty training and assistance. Language and cultural barriers impede Red Cross direct access for serving Vietnamese Katrina survivors. BPSOS has worked with the Red Cross to develop processes to bridge the divide and to improve the Red Cross's Vietnamese linguistic and cultural competency. Through the American Red Cross's national partnerships initiative, BPSOS is committed to working closely with the organization to find ways to partner in all phases of disaster relief, from preparedness to response and recovery.

Public Communications Management

To inform hurricane survivors of services, benefits, and opportunities, BPSOS began deploying its network of Vietnamese-language mass media in the Gulf Coast in late 2005. Thousands of copies of *Mach Song* found their way to Vietnamese families along the Gulf Coast, and BPSOS soon teamed up with media organizations

to broadcast its Vietnamese-language radio and television programs. BPSOS distributed radio sets to two thousand Vietnamese families and populated the Gulf Coast with television satellite dishes. This network of mass media is being used to prepare the local Vietnamese communities for future disasters and contributes to America's homeland security.

Looking Forward

Case management is the first phase in BPSOS's long-term recovery plan. Moving into the second phase, the organization is replicating its direct service programs to the Gulf Coast. The BPSOS Katrina staff has assessed and identified gaps in services and developed plans to fill out and improve those available to Vietnamese survivors.

In the final phase, BPSOS will build capacity for local grassroots organizations to sustain the replicated programs and prepare the local community for future emergencies. "We need to invest in infrastructures that will provide a lasting change for our Katrina survivors, because that is what they need most," says Tram Nguyen, emergency preparedness and response project director.

Conclusion

As time goes on, BPSOS will continue to transform itself, expanding programs and searching for ways to improve the lot of the refugees through advocacy. Its history with the difficult issues associated with the boat people, presence in the Vietnamese-American community nationwide, and newfound partners and programs stemming from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita will serve it well in striving to help diverse peoples in their quest for dignity and quality of life. ❖

Tim Dirks Named New President of The Bureaucrat, Inc.

The Bureaucrat, Inc., publisher of *The Public Manager*, proudly announces the recent selection of Tim Dirks as its new president, succeeding Warren Master, our current editor-in-chief. Tim, a highly respected federal human resources executive and recent president and CEO of GRA, Inc., brings a wealth of experience, enthusiasm, and expertise to the position. We welcome Tim to *The Public Manager* team and look forward to the boundless opportunities ahead.