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Editorial: The new Hmong/McCollum comes through

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As a new wave of Hmong families settles into Minnesota this fall, mayors and school superintendents are facing up to a difficult reality: Refugee resettlement costs money. Schools need bilingual teachers, cities need temporary housing, public agencies need translators, and so forth.

Fortunately, Rep. Betty McCollum noticed too. The St. Paul Democrat teamed up with Rep. George Radanovich, a California Republican, to secure an extra \$15 million in an important appropriations bill that passed the House last week. Minnesota's senators, Republican Norm Coleman and Democrat Mark Dayton, have been following the issue too. The Senate should make sure that its version of the spending bill includes a comparable sum for states that play host to these new Americans.

The McCollum-Radanovich effort started last summer, when both lawmakers realized that Minnesota, California and Wisconsin were likely to receive most of the new Hmong refugees.

And, because of a quirk in the federal formula for resettlement funds, none of the three states was likely to receive extra money to handle the influx. The two wrote a joint letter to key House appropriators, and last week their committee's ranking Democrat, Rep. David Obey of Wisconsin, won an agreement to add extra Hmong resettlement funds to a House appropriations bill.

Despite daunting responsibilities, the people of Minnesota, California and Wisconsin should welcome this wave of new Americans. Providing them a fresh start in the United States settles an old debt dating to the Vietnam War and fulfills a moral obligation to share America's vast wealth with the world's poorer residents. If history is any guide, the new Americans will join a long tradition of immigrants who made the nation stronger.

For all that, however, immigration is a federal decision. When it imposes costs on states, cities and school districts Washington has an obligation to share the expense. The Bush administration has resisted an increase in resettlement aid because the 15,000 Hmong refugees don't represent a net increase to the total number of immigrants the government was expecting this year.

But the Hmong families were a late addition to federal immigration policy for the year, and the states where they will wind up -- Minnesota, California and Wisconsin -- were not budgeted for increased aid until now.

It's encouraging to see bipartisan comity in an otherwise bitterly partisan election year -- especially when across-the-aisle cooperation serves the worthy cause of making a home for new Americans.

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