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Cambodian Family moves into new digs

March 19, 2010 | By THERESA CISNEROS

SANTA ANA – A local nonprofit group that has assisted tens of thousands of refugees and immigrant families over the past 20 years is hoping to affect thousands more now that it's acquired a spacious new headquarters.

The Cambodian Family, founded in the early 1980s to assist Cambodian refugees living in the Minnie Street neighborhood, has grown to provide health, employment and youth programs for central Santa Ana residents and refugees of all nationalities.

In a move that representatives say signals a new chapter in the organization's evolution, the group in the last week moved out of a cramped warehouse it's rented since 1983 and into an 11,500-square-foot office building purchased with the help of a \$1.9-million federal grant.

"This is a dream come true," said Mike Murtaugh, a program director who's been involved with the center since 1993. "It gives people a sense of pride to walk into the new building. We made the other facility as nice as we could, but there was a limit to what we could do."

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The Cambodian Family will host a Cambodian New Year and Census Day event from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday, March 20 to encourage community participation in the 2010 U.S. Census. The center is at 1626 E. 4th St. in Santa Ana.

The money comes through the Federal Empowerment Zone, a 10-year program designed to revitalize and spur job growth in selected communities across the country through special tax incentives and federal grants. Santa Ana's Empowerment Zone encompasses four-square miles.

The Cambodian Family will use about \$1.73 million for the purchase of the \$2.25 million building, said Executive Director Sundaram Rama; the group will take out loans on the remainder.

The organization assists about 1,500 regular clients annually, said Rama, adding that the figure does not include scores of drop-in clients who seek its services each year.

About 37 percent of its client base is Cambodian; 33 percent is Hispanic; 20 percent is Vietnamese; 4 percent is Iranian and 6 percent is of other heritages.

The center partners with government agencies to offer an array of services, from English as a Second Language courses for adults to a kindergarten-readiness program.

Samel Suos, 58, has attended English classes through The Cambodian Family for 18 months. Through an interpreter, he described the experience as "excellent" and said he's impressed that the center can unify immigrants from various countries.

"People come here to learn and access services and they seem to get along," said Suos, who is originally from Cambodia and resides in Santa Ana.

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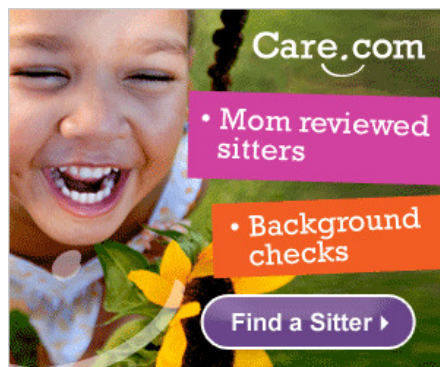
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Those associated with The Cambodian Family say they hope the new digs, at 1626 E. Fourth St., will allow them to expand their offerings and serve more clients.

Rama said the organization wants to convert a fenced-off section of the parking lot into a playground so that it can obtain a child-care license and offer day care for local families. That wasn't at option at the old facility, bordered by a chain-link fence with barbed wire on one side and a marble-grinding company on another.

Center staffers are busy organizing offices and assisting a new crop of clients from the surrounding neighborhood.

"It's about sustainability," said Rama, standing in a lobby filled with a popcorn machine, grass hula skirts and other items that still need to be stored away. "The new building gives the image that we're grounded here. We're doing well, and we're continuing to provide services."

Information: www.cambodianfamily.org

Contact the writer: tcisneros@ocregister.com or 714-704-3707

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