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The gumshoes at the welfare

As happens with such stories, there are different accounts of what was said when and how events unfolded. But just relying on facts that all sides agree on, it's hard not to conclude that welfare department investigators for Sacramento County went overboard trying to make their fraud case against a Hmong refugee couple.

The case began when investigators found two bank accounts with several thousand dollars each in the couple's name. Under the law, if the money belonged to them, the couple is guilty of bilking the state out of over \$70,000 in welfare benefits and food stamps. But the couple claims the money was part of an emergency fund belonging to a group of refugees for whom they were merely acting as treasurers.

The two sides agree that investigators never provided interpreters to the couple. The investigators said they had no problem communicating with the suspects, that they offered to provide interpreters, and the offer was declined. But Bee reporter Richard Abrams needed an interpreter when he interviewed the couple, and there were several times, even with an interpreter, that misunderstandings arose. In a situation where prison, considerable taxpayer money and big fines are involved, and in which the suspects are foreigners from an unsophisticated, rural culture in the mountains of Laos, interpreters should not have been merely of-

fered, but required. Nor is there any question that warrants were issued and that the couple was arrested, booked and fingerprinted before administrative hearings on the issue had been completed. In the first of two such hearings, the presiding administrative law judge ruled in favor of the refugees. A decision in the second is still pending. Both sides concede that if the couple had placed the money at issue in a bank account in the refugee organization's name, the whole dispute could have been avoided.

While no policy of the welfare department may have been violated by the investigators, it was certainly not the department's finest hour. Dick Winsor, assistant deputy director of the Department of Social Services, explained that "you have to recognize that welfare is very complex, even for people that are very skilled in English." Which is all the more reason why people who have no such skills should have been provided with someone to assist and guide them through the system. Instead they were interrogated in an isolated office by welfare police who remain convinced they were dealing with people who committed a crime and were lying about it. Perhaps they were — the issue is still unresolved — but that doesn't excuse the way this case was handled.