

Sheng Thao

Born and raised in Stockton, CA, Oakland's Mayor Sheng Thao grew up in poverty as the daughter of Hmong refugees. Her family used social services and lived in public housing. She left home at 17, and in her early 20s found herself in an abusive relationship, isolated from her family, and pregnant. She escaped this domestic violence, but soon had a baby and no permanent housing. For months, she and her son Ben slept on couches or in her car. When Ben was 10 months old, she got a job at a local community college and started taking classes. With the help of welfare and a Head Start program for her son, she put herself through school. She became class valedictorian, then transferred to UC Berkeley, where she co-founded a food access program for low-income students and graduated with a degree in legal studies.

Shortly after graduating, she got a job as a legislative aide for an Oakland City Councilmember and worked her way up to Chief of Staff. In 2018, she ran for City Council District 4 and won, becoming the first Hmong-American Councilmember in California history. As a Councilmember, she bridged political divides to make progress on many key issues. In the last budget, she brought the Council together to make historic investments in violence prevention programs while also ensuring funding for three new police academies. Last year, Mayor Thao negotiated a historic agreement between organized labor and the Oakland business community to modernize the city's business tax structure and secure millions in new revenue for public services.