

**ENHANCING THE ABILITY OF FIREFIGHTERS TO COMMUNICATE WITH
SPANISH SPEAKING CUSTOMERS**

Executive Development

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Appendix Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at <http://www.lrc.dhs.gov/> to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.

Abstract

Hillsboro Fire Department (HFD) recognized that problems exist in communicating with the Latino/Hispanic community, which comprises 18.9% of the population of Hillsboro (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000, p.2). Records indicated that 5.6% of HFD's emergency responses were to people who primarily spoke Spanish (Oregon all Incident Reporting System, 2003). Beyond the obvious barrier of two different languages, other significant barriers exist.

The research identified methods to enhance department personnel's ability to communicate effectively with Spanish speakers. Using descriptive research, these questions were addressed:

1. What Spanish language programs are currently available from educational institutions in the Portland metropolitan area?
2. What communication barriers exist between HFD personnel and the Latino/Hispanic community?
3. What steps have other fire and police departments taken to enhance their personnel's ability to communicate with Latino or Hispanic customers?

The procedures used to answer these questions entailed; internet searches and course catalog reviews for class availability, literary review of Spanish communication enhancement, Spanish instructor and student interviews, Latino/Hispanic community leader interviews, individual interviews regarding language barriers, and a survey of emergency responders in Oregon.

The research revealed several avenues available through which HFD employees may learn Spanish; formal language training programs, self-taught programs, and

occupational specific training. It also identified communication barriers and steps to possibly overcome them.

Research findings indicated the department could reach both long and short-term goals by; providing qualified interpreter services, becoming actively involved in the Latino community, initiating cultural awareness training, implementing strategies for recruiting bilingual employees, and providing language training to current employees.

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Introduction

Hillsboro Fire Department (HFD) has recognized that a problem exists in communicating with Spanish speaking customers. Of the 60 fire suppression personnel employed at HFD, none are bilingual in Spanish. This is a major concern of HFD due to the high number of Latino or Hispanic residents in Hillsboro. HFD's records indicate 5.6% of emergency responses are to customers who speak primarily Spanish (Oregon all Incident Reporting System, 2003).

Due to the inability to communicate with Spanish speaking clients, emergency responders often resort to treating them as if they were unconscious or deaf, or utilize children as interpreters. Recognizing that communication barriers exist, the purpose of this research is to identify methods to enhance the ability of HFD's personnel to effectively communicate with this growing population and enable them to provide quality service to these customers.

Using descriptive research, the following questions will be addressed:

1. What formal Spanish language programs are currently available at educational institutions within the Portland or Hillsboro metropolitan area?
2. What communication barriers exist between HFD's personnel and the Latino or Hispanic community?
3. What steps have other fire and police departments, within Oregon, taken to enhance their personnel's ability to communicate with Latino or Hispanic customers?

Background and Significance

The City of Hillsboro is located in Washington County, Oregon, 15 miles west of Portland and is the fifth largest city in Oregon at 70,168 residents (U.S. Bureau of the

Census, 2000). The city has experienced steady growth for the past decade. Hillsboro's overall population increased 87% from 37,598 to 70,168 while the Latino/Hispanic population increased 213% from 4,243 in 1990 to 13,262 in 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990, 2000). The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000) reported Hillsboro's Latino or Hispanic population at 13,262 (18.9%). Of Spanish speaking residents over the age of five, 6783, approximately 10%, speak English "less than very well" (p. 2). In light of the 213% increase over the last 10 years in Hillsboro's Latino or Hispanic population and with 19% of current residents being Latino or Hispanic, there is reason to believe that Hillsboro will experience an increasing Latino or Hispanic population in the future. The increase in population will require a greater need for services from HFD.

If Hillsboro Fire Department (HFD) was to reflect the community it served, then 11 (19%) of its 60 line personnel would be Latino/Hispanic. At this time, HFD does not reflect the community's ethnic diversity.

In the past, HFD has attempted to address the inability to communicate with Spanish-speaking customers. The Department has done this by offering a conversational Spanish course one night a week for interested personnel, held at a central location. Instructors were brought in from the local community college, Portland Community College (PCC), and college credit hours could be earned. Even though the class was free and on duty members were allowed to attend, a high drop out rate was experienced. Furthermore, with no follow-up training or refresher courses, those that did complete the three-month course have limited linguistic ability. The other communication tool available to HFD personnel is the use of a telephone interpreter service accessed through the dispatch center. The individual in the field calls the dispatch center non-emergency

line and is then transferred to American Telephone and Telegraph's (AT&T) Language Line service. AT&T started this program in 1989 as a means of addressing the communication barrier that existed not only with the Spanish speaking population but also with other less prevalent languages. Presently, HFD personnel seldom use this service. Over the last three years, this service has only been accessed five times. Line personnel believe that there would be a significant delay in obtaining interpreter service using this method. They find it easier to locate someone bilingual on scene, often a child.

Other than the in-house class mentioned above, HFD was historically not willing to pay for Spanish classes, as they were not considered directly related to the job of a firefighter. This stance changed approximately one year ago. The Training Division now actively supports individuals interested in learning Spanish by paying for their tuition, books, and allowing the required time off to attend the class. HFD is currently considering an employee's request to participate in an immersion program in Mexico sponsored by Portland State University (PSU). With the support shown by the Training Division, more of HFD employees have expressed interest in pursuing Spanish language training. As HFD encourages individuals to learn another language, the natural and historical probability is for represented employees to desire incentive pay for bilingual capabilities. Potentially, incentive payments could represent a greater cost to the department than that of initial language training.

In the future, HFD will need to establish clear standards and guidelines that outline the level of commitment it will provide in support of language training. HFD will also need to evaluate the use of interpreter services as an alternative method to, or as an enhancement to, language training.

A query of HFD's responses over the last five months revealed that 5.6% were to a non-English speaking environment (Oregon all Incident Reporting System, 2003). On Christmas morning 2002, HFD responded to a double fatality apartment fire in which two young Hispanic men lost their lives. The post fire investigation revealed the fire was caused by a cigarette and that both individuals were deceased prior to the arrival of HFD's first engine company. Never the less, the personnel on Engine 102 were met by non-English speaking residents and were unable to obtain critical information in a timely fashion. They were unaware of the potential number of occupants, people who had exited the apartment, or special hazards that may have existed. Fortunately, the assumptions they made and the actions they took were appropriate and correct. Variations of this scenario occur on a daily basis for HFD's personnel.

This research project links directly to the United States Fire Administration's (2003) five-year operational objectives as it seeks to identify methods to enhance HFD's ability "to respond appropriately in a timely manner to emergent issues" (p. 1). By example, through reducing language barriers, HFD's personnel will be able to diagnose a heart attack quicker, find a missing child sooner, or offer more compassionate words to someone who is injured or has suffered a loss. Other objectives of the United States Fire Administration (2003) are:

1. Reduce the loss of life from fire by 15%.
 - By reducing by 25% the loss of life of the age group 14 years old and below, and
 - By reducing by 25% the loss of life of the age group 65 years old and above, and

- By reducing by 25% the loss of life of firefighters. (p. 1)

Arguably, enhancing the ability of emergency responders to communicate with Spanish speaking individuals, increases the probability of a quicker rescue, earlier diagnosis, and increased awareness of hazards, will lead to a reduction in the loss of life.

The National Fire Academy's (NFA) Executive Development Course, Unit Eight, covers ethics. This research directly relates to public sector ethics. "Public officials are fiduciaries (persons to whom property or power is entrusted for the benefit of another)" (National Fire Academy Student Manual, 2002, p. 8-3). Having the fiduciary responsibility of providing emergency and regulatory services to the citizens of Hillsboro requires HFD to act ethically when determining how to provide these services. There is an ethical obligation to both the Spanish-speaking customers in Hillsboro as well as to the employees of HFD to alleviate the language barrier that currently exists.

Literature Review

The author of *Spanish for Law Enforcement Personnel*, W. C. Harvey (1996) accurately states the problem that emergency providers across the nation face:

In cities everywhere, officials are struggling to meet the needs of the non-English speaking Hispanic community. But it is difficult to serve and protect the public when language and culture barriers interfere with basic communication. ... In emergency situations, quick thinking and automatic reflex mix with personal experience and professional skill. Usually, there is not enough time to think in English, let alone in another language. Whether it is a traffic accident, an assault, a fire, or a family dispute, the key is to find out what happened and who needs your immediate attention. (p. 142)

The literary investigation for this research project sought to discover what others have written or said regarding the issue of teaching the Spanish language, identifying communication barriers, and enhancing communication. To answer this question, course curriculums were reviewed, communication barriers were identified, and other emergency service providers were surveyed.

Portland Community College (PCC) offers a four credit class, “SPA 101 First Year Spanish” (Portland Community College, 2003, p. 73) which is structured for beginning communication in Spanish. The class curriculum includes listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, and culture. This class also require the student to enroll in “SPA 111c First Year Spanish Conversation” which is designed to practice structures and vocabulary of first year Spanish in a conversational format. PCC also offers, through their Customized and Workplace Training (CWT) program, occupational specific Spanish language training utilizing the Command Spanish program. Their course descriptions states the following:

Command Spanish is the leading provider of occupational Spanish training in the United States. Command Spanish programs provide short term language training for more than 30 occupations by teaching industry specific Spanish phrases required to communicate with customers and co-workers who speak Spanish and little if no English. No prior knowledge of the Spanish language is required.

(Portland Community College, 2003, p. 74)

Command Spanish Inc. offers two courses that target the fire service. Neither of the programs requires prior knowledge of the Spanish language according the company.

The first program is Survival Spanish for Paramedics and Emergency Medical Technicians. The course is described as follows:

This program is designed for non-Spanish-speaking paramedics and EMTs to use Spanish language commands and phrases that will enable them to assist Spanish speaking persons in emergency situations. Emphasis is placed on concise Spanish to determine the patient's chief complaint, extent of injury or nature of illness, as well as explain procedures and treatment. (Command Spanish, 2003, p.1)

The second program is Emergency Spanish for Firefighters with the following course description from the company:

This program prepares non Spanish-speaking firefighters, paramedics, and EMTs to respond to fire, chemical, and still alarms where only Spanish is spoken. By learning a variety of commands, firefighters can take charge of the situation and direct victims and other bystanders to safety. (Command Spanish, 2003, p.1)

According to PCC instructor Bonnie Starkey, the Command Spanish course, if taken through PCC in a combination format, has an instructional time of approximately 24 hours of classroom training at a cost of \$4010.00 plus \$54.00 per student manual. This was a fixed cost and would accommodate up to 20 students (personal communication, August 16, 2003).

Portland State University (PSU) offers an introductory Spanish class that is one year in length. The course was redesigned in 2001 to improve the instructional format. Stated about the former program; "...the instructional approach often mimics older teaching practices focusing on language structure (grammar) rather than functional language acquisition, practice and proficiency" (Portland State University, 2001, p. 1).

The Institute for Social and International Studies (ISIS) was established in 1988 as an independent, not-for-profit institute of higher learning which transcripts their courses through PSU. The admissions and enrollments are administered at the office of International Education Services at PSU. The Spanish courses offered by ISIS are conducted in Barcelona, Spain and are taught at eight different levels, from beginning Spanish to full immersion programs. The lengths of the programs are based on quarters or trimesters (Institute for Social and International Studies, 2003).

Portland police chief Mark Kroeker and seven police officers flew to Mexico for a ten day Spanish immersion course in February of 2003. The trip was coordinated through PSU's Hatfield School of Government (KATU News, 2003a). Kroeker stated, "It's one thing to learn classroom Spanish, it's quite another to deal with local street Spanish" (p. 1).

Portland's public school district is sending eighth grade students to Costa Rica for a two week Spanish immersion program in the summer of 2003. "In Costa Rica the students will perform community service, study and speak Spanish daily, and stay with a family during their visit. This is an invaluable (and often their first) experience in another culture" (KATU News, 2003b, p. 1).

The Oregon Pacific Area Health Education Center (2003) is affiliated with Oregon Health and Science University and offers several programs that would assist with improving communications. They offer a variety of Spanish Language Courses including Basic Spanish for EMTs as well as several cultural and diversity programs. They also have a Spanish language assessment program. They describe this program as:

Designed according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages guidelines, this program provides an easy and inexpensive way to gauge the Spanish language skills of your employees. This simple program can be administered to employees by a proctor any time, any place, with just a tape recorder. Complete the program, mail in the audio recording and written assessment and receive confirmation of competency level. (p. 1)

Another approach to learning the Spanish language is online classes. An example of this is offered by Optimnem (2003). They state:

An average language student spends between 300-400 hours studying Spanish in the classroom by the age of sixteen. Yet inefficient teaching methods, such as rote memorization and use of verb and grammar tables, give the learner no real feel for the language's natural usage patterns.

Optimnem Spanish is a fast-paced, comprehensive and uniquely accessible 7-unit course (with accompanying worksheets for each) alternative to traditional learning approaches. An Optimnem learner can expect to reach a good level of language confidence with just 20-30 hours study and practice, using our unique intuitive learning system. (p. 1)

There are also countless numbers of books and tapes available for self-teaching. One such program is *Introduction to Spanish for Health Care Workers*, Yale University Press (2002) had this to say about the book:

Designed for students with little or no formal background in Spanish, this textbook provides the necessary language and vocabulary to facilitate better communication between health care providers and the growing Spanish speaking

community in the United States. This classroom text uses readings, exercises, and interactive activities to integrate Spanish medical vocabulary, grammar, and colloquial terms that nurses, doctors, dentists, and medical technicians need most. Rich cultural notes explain Hispanic customs and communication styles. (p. 1)

Another example of this form of instruction is the book quoted earlier, *Spanish for Law Enforcement Personnel* (Harvey, 1996). This program focuses on the necessary words needed to convey instructions as well as understand basic communication.

The final example of a self taught program is an audio program called “Pimsleur approach - Spanish Quick and Simple Starter Course” (n. d.). This program continues onto more advanced classes as well. The Pimsleur program concentrates entirely on the spoken language; “Most language learning systems fail to acknowledge that writing only exists to represent the words we speak. So you should ask yourself, why should I learn to read Spanish if I can’t even speak it” (p. 3)?

Another option of instructing our personnel in the Spanish language is via a private contractor/tutor. Clara Grebel (n. d.) is one example of someone advertising on the Internet. She states that she can tailor her teaching to specific needs such as occupational Spanish for health care and that, “attention will be paid to verb tenses, grammar, idioms, spelling, etc., although learning about Spanish will not take precedence over acquiring the ability to use Spanish” (p. 2).

Webster’s dictionary defines a barrier as “any obstruction; what hinders approach, or progress; what stands in the way; an obstacle” (Thatcher, 1984, p. 66). Clearly, the dissimilar language is a barrier, but other barriers exist between HFD and the Latino/Hispanic community. Lack of knowledge about, and understanding of, the Latino

or Hispanic culture is a barrier that inhibits effective communication. Dees (1994) gives three examples of cultural differences that are important to recognize: “Latino men are not very keen about being aided by female responders. Also, Latinos should have the opportunity to save face in conflict situations. Hand gestures communicate a lot” (p. 110).

The American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA) published a paper in 1999 that discussed the web site, Med Spanish that was designed for use as an alternative communication tool in the emergency department when translation services were not available. Koff and McGowan (1999) addressed barriers that exist when faced with non English-speaking patients and stated:

Translators, the AT&T Translation Service, and family members are frequently used by hospitals to mediate a dialogue between the physician and his or her patient. The translators, though effective, are expensive and can be limited by qualifications of personnel and availability; if not on site, access to translation services can add significant time to the patient encounter. Phone translation services are impersonal and can be logistically difficult to use. It is impossible to predict when a patient will require a translator, which prohibits full time staffing at many institutions. Inexpensive resources such as textbooks, are useful but are limited in their distribution, and can be misplaced or lost during a time of need. Speed recognition software in the future may be the most effective means of communication if no translator is present, but the technology is currently still under development. (p.1)

They also stated:

The use of family members to bridge the gap between patient and provider is only as effective as the willingness of the patient to divulge symptoms and medical conditions to the family member serving as the translator and the family member's ability to adequately translate the needs of the patients. (p. 2)

Finally, they addressed the use of children as interpreters when they stated:

Another growing practice is the use of bilingual children to interpret for their parents. This too brings certain problems. Children frequently cannot understand the content of the questions that the health worker needs answered. Likewise, children frequently lack the emotional maturity to interpret questions dealing with certain details of anatomy and physiology that are routinely kept private from children until they reach a certain level of sophistication. (p. 2)

Another barrier that exists is cultural differences within the Latino/Hispanic community. There are different dialects spoken, and cultural practices observed within the Latino/Hispanic community, depending on the country or region of origin (Oregon School Board Association, 2001, p. 8).

Jane Perkins also addresses issues surrounding the use of appropriate interpreters in her article, "Overcoming Language Barriers to Health Care." Perkins (1999) reports that translation by unqualified interpreters is prone to omissions, additions, substitutions, volunteered opinions, and semantic errors that can seriously distort care. Also stated was:

In addition, the use of untrained interpreters can result in a breach of patient confidentiality. Reliance on interpreters who are not trained in the ethics of interpretation can cause a patient not to speak freely in front of a health care

provider, especially when children are translating for parents about such sensitive issues as spousal abuse and sexual practices. (p.2)

Perkins also addresses these legal concerns:

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights has consistently found that recipients of federal funds have obligations under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act to communicate effectively with people of limited English proficiency. ...in more than one hundred administrative decisions ... they articulate the following basic requirements:

1. Recipients of federal funds should have a written policy for linguistic access and should make sure that staffs are aware of the policy.
2. Recipients of federal funds should have a procedure for offering translation services to LEP [limited English proficiency] patients during all hours of operation.
3. Family and friends should be allowed to interpret only after a patient has been informed of the availability of the services of a qualified interpreter at no cost to the patient.
4. Minors should not be used to translate.
5. 'Qualified' interpreters should have demonstrated bilingual proficiency and knowledge of medical terms and of the ethics of medical interpreting.
6. The use of telephone translation services should be limited to situations in which no bilingual staff person or qualified interpreter is available to provide services.
7. Important medical documents should be translated for the patients. (pp. 4-5)

A report prepared for the Hillsboro Economic Development Partnership, which is made up of the City of Hillsboro, Washington County, and the Greater Hillsboro Chamber of Commerce, cites additional barriers as well as reiterating those previously discussed. The report addresses linguistic barriers and cultural barriers but also touches on the issue of trust and of lower formal educational levels found in the non-English speaking residents of Washington County. The report states, “Regardless of economic success of entrepreneurs, trust is perceived as a major barrier to Latino immigrants utilizing existing services (Jimenez, 2003, p. 12).

A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Baker, Parker, Williams, Coates, Pitkin, 1996) looked at barriers Hispanic patients faced in emergency care and reported that, “communication is further impaired by differences in culture, communication styles, and low educational attainment (p.1). They also concluded that due to the high prevalence of illiteracy, “attempts to overcome language barriers by providing written instructions will not be successful” (p. 2). This concept was echoed by Adele Hughes, Business Development Director with the Greater Hillsboro Area Chamber of Commerce when she stressed the need for communication to be conducted verbally due to the high illiteracy rate among the non-English speaking Hispanic population. Hughes also discussed cultural barriers including a work ethic, or pattern of work, that requires Latino/Hispanic youths to earn an income as soon as they are able. This is due to a typical family income being at or below the poverty line. The Latino/Hispanic population understands the clear benefits of hard work but has not embraced the concept that delaying an income for continuing education may bring a better life to their family (personal conversation, Adele Hughes, July 2, 2003).

An extensive article titled, *A Portrait of Poverty in Oregon*, was written for the University of Oregon Extension Service, and addressed the same barrier:

About 200,000 Oregonians are Hispanic, according to 1998 population estimates by the Oregon Department of Employment. About 27%, or 54,000 of them, live below the poverty level.

Almost a third of Oregon's Hispanics have no health insurance. They earn about half the average state per capita income. This forces many young Hispanics to drop out of school to find jobs to help support their families.

“With a great supply of low-paying jobs in the state, what would you do if you were poor?” asked Maria Elena Campisteguy-Hawkins, the executive director of the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement. “Work or go hungry?

Sometimes it takes both parents and kids working to support a family in Oregon at low wages.” [(Dailey, Novak, Rost, Savonen, n.d., Hispanic section, para. 2)]

Kimberly Nemeth is the director of one of the areas largest Latino/Hispanic community outreach programs, the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Centers. She felt several barriers might exist in communicating with the non-English speaking Latino/Hispanic community. They were: a lack of trust, different dialects, a high level of illiteracy, and a male dominate culture (personal conversation, Kimberley Nemeth, July 29, 2003).

Francisco Trujillo is a Latino career apparatus operator at Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue, one of Oregon’s largest fire departments. He voiced the same concerns as others. Trujillo felt that language difference is only a partial contributor to the communication barrier. “Two to three years of Spanish classes in a formal setting still

leaves you with minimum Spanish ability and gives you no cultural awareness. When you understand the culture, you can communicate better,” stated Trujillo. As examples of cultural differences inhibiting communication, Trujillo pointed out the following:

1. The literacy rate of Mexican born, non-English speaking residents in Washington County is low. He estimated that the typical male only completed second grade and the typical female might have an eighth grade education.
2. A non-English speaking individual will be less forthcoming or shy because they are uncomfortable with their language abilities.
3. There is need for the child or young family member to earn an income in order to help support the family.
4. In Washington County, many different dialects are spoken, which complicate translations.
5. A strong distrust of public servants exists within the Latino/Hispanic community, which may lead them to give false information and/or names.
6. It is important to respect the male dominant Latino/Hispanic culture and talk to the father, if available, prior to talking to a female family member.

However, the mother or wife will be the person best able to give an accurate history. (personal conversation, Francisco Trujillo, July 31, 2003)

Trujillo also addressed bias on the part of non-Spanish speaking firefighters, and its potential to be a factor in communication. As an example, it is an accepted practice to provide a different level of care to non-English speaking patients due to the inability to obtain accurate histories and chief complaints (personal conversation, Francisco Trujillo, July 31, 2003).

Jim Lashbaugh, a career apparatus operator at Hillsboro Fire Department, also addressed fire service cultural bias. Lashbaugh has taken one full year of Spanish at Portland Community College and feels he is still unable to adequately communicate with Spanish-speaking customers. Lashbaugh stated that often firefighters treat non-English speaking patients as if they were either deaf or unconscious, again leading to a worst-case level of treatment (personal conversation, Jim Lashbaugh, July 17, 2003).

The last question addressed in this review looked at steps taken by other emergency service providers to improve communication with non-English speaking customers. Tuality Community Hospital (TCH) in Hillsboro, Oregon, has established a contract with Integrity Interpreting Incorporated. Marcian Wallace, the Emergency Nurse Manager at TCH wrote a recommendation letter on January 29, 2003, that is included in Integrity Interpreting Incorporated's company brochure. In this letter, Wallace wrote the following:

Over the years of our contract with Integrity Interpreting, I have had many contacts with Denny and Diane Gradin and their staff. Each interaction has been competent, correct, and patiently handled by them. To better evaluate their interpreting skills, I have interviewed staff who have some Spanish speaking knowledge. Invariably I have received very positive feedback regarding the correct and literal interpretations that are done.

Primarily our need has been in the Spanish language as we have a large Spanish speaking population here in western Washington County. With my awareness of the different dialects and learning skills of our clients, I have been careful to be aware of any difficulties that might arise. In all these years, I have

approached Denny only one time with concerns. He was very professional and appropriately responsive to the issue. I feel comfortable with his quality review process and improvement plans. (Wallace, 2003)

Phoenix Arizona firefighters participated in “Spanish Immersion ‘99” in which eleven members of the department were sent to Puerto Vallarta for an Emergency Medical System (EMS) exchange program:

In exchange for sharing their expertise in the EMS field, the Phoenix firefighting EMTs and paramedics received hands-on experience in situations that will improve the Spanish medical terminology skills they need to assist the growing Latino populations of their city. During their visit, they stayed with families of Asociacion Femenil members. As part of the cultural exchange, they were also learning and speaking Spanish with their host families.

The Phoenix contingent learned proper Spanish terminology for documentation and patient histories. Course instructor Jim Mabry said that by working “shoulder to shoulder” with the Cruz Roja medics, his team “really learned the concept of the Spanish language,” and that the program has “really worked out great.” (Doty, 2000, pp. 94-95)

Dan Hernandez (2001) wrote a grant proposal for the Monterey County Fire Chief’s Association titled “Breaking the Fire Department’s Language Barrier.” Leaders of their Hispanic community expressed the following belief:

...that the Spanish-speaking citizens do not understand the fire safe messages transmitted from the fire agencies whose primary language and culture is English based. They also expressed their belief that the fire agencies display little

understanding of the Spanish speaking culture, further complicating efforts of cross communication. (p. 1)

The goal of this program is to develop a fire safe public education program based on the cultural expectations and the language familiar to the Hispanic community.

- A) Identify the cultural and language barriers that prevent the Spanish-speaking members of the Monterey County population from active participation in providing for a fire safe community.
- B) Train Monterey County firefighters in the cultural diversity of Spanish speaking residents, which potentially prevents the accurate exchange of information.
- C) Partner with local Spanish language media agencies to develop a television, radio, and elementary school campaign which explains the role of the fire department in the Spanish speaking community and educates Spanish speaking children in safe preventative actions for self protection. (objectives, p. 4)

The Garland Fire Department developed Spanish flash cards, modeled after the Command Spanish flash cards, which would allow, “limited communication between an English-speaking fire officer and a Spanish-speaking neighbor as to determination of the existence and location of any person within a burning structure” (Werner, 2000, p. 20). Werner also suggested that Garland Fire Department enact the following measures: (a) have a private corporation that specializes in language instruction manage a language class to their personnel; (b) recruit community volunteers to assist in refresher training;

(c) pay an incentive to those personnel proficient in Spanish; and (d) contract with AT&T Language Line (pp. 43-44).

Walter Reed (1998) of Coral Gables Fire-Rescue Department wrote about Aurora Colorado's program of establishing community volunteers who became emergency services translators, staffed emergency phone lines, and developed a book of basic question and responses. Reed recommended that a similar program for Coral Gables should be implemented, as well as: (a) on-duty language training; (b) off-duty tuition reimbursement; and (c) a recruitment process that would attract bilingual employees (pp. 18-20).

In summary, there are a multitude of Spanish language training programs available to HFD. They range from on-line or self study programs to full immersion programs abroad. Locally, there are several traditional Spanish language classes at institutes of higher learning. PSU and PCC both offer traditional Spanish training with PCC being less expensive. The location of a satellite campus across from HFD's downtown station is also an advantage of PCC courses. Through their Community Workplace Training, PCC offers Command Spanish, which teaches occupation specific Spanish. Also, multiple cultural barriers exist that cannot be overcome by simply learning the Spanish language. Finally, HFD will not be reinventing the wheel when addressing the issue of communication with the Latino/Hispanic community. Many departments utilizing a variety of basic steps have begun to strengthen communication with Spanish-speaking customers. A comprehensive program consists of a combination of (a) community involvement, (b) Spanish language instruction, (c) interpreting services, (d) cultural awareness, and (e) bilingual recruitment.

Procedures

The procedures used to conduct this research project involved a literary review, personal interviews, review of course descriptions, and a survey of fire and police departments in Oregon.

The literature review employed several formats. The Google search engine was utilized for on-line investigation of many related topics. The following is a partial list of topics; (a) Spanish language barriers, (b) Spanish language classes in Portland, Oregon, (c) Spanish for emergency personnel, and (d) Spanish language aids. Each search revealed a variety of useful sources, which were evaluated for reference use in this project or were simply added in the development of the project. The Internet was also used for specific information needs such as census data. The literature review included a search of articles and applied research projects found at the National Fire Academy's library containing information relating to Spanish, language, communication, and barriers. Finally, a search of potentially relevant literature in Hillsboro's library system was completed.

Personal interviews were conducted with a variety of individuals with the intent of gaining information from several different perspectives. The interviews were with (a) local Hispanic residents of Hillsboro, (b) the Catholic Father of a largely Latino or Hispanic congregation in Hillsboro, (c) chamber of commerce personnel responsible for developing Latino/Hispanic small businesses in Hillsboro, (d) the director of one of the areas largest Latino/Hispanic community outreach programs, (e) a local Hispanic firefighter, (f) non bilingual firefighters at HFD, (g) a high school Spanish teacher, and (h) a College Spanish teacher. These interviews focused on questions regarding available

language programs, existing barriers in communication, and ideas for enhancing the ability of HFD firefighters to communicate with Spanish-speaking customers. Not all interviews were referenced in this project but each contributed unique perspectives and enhanced understanding of the issues at hand. These interviews also generated potential partnerships and ideas for future development.

Finally, the research included a survey (Appendix) of emergency responders in Oregon. This survey was administered by a company named Advanced Survey.Com, which allows the researcher to create a survey using their own logos and then email a chosen list of recipients the hyperlink to the survey. The recipients included all Oregon Fire Departments that list an e-mail address with the Oregon State Fire Marshal's office and all Oregon Police Departments listed with Oregon Association Chiefs of Police. Totalling 274 fire departments and 138 police departments, this accounts for over 90% of all fire and police departments in Oregon. The email addresses for the fire departments were obtained directly from the Oregon Fire Marshal's staff and the police departments were contacted through the Oregon Association Chiefs of Police. Questions were designed to determine the demographics of the department responding to the survey, their ability to communicate with Spanish speaking customers, and the steps they have taken to address this issue.

Statistical analysis

The results of the survey were analyzed and reported in the results section of this paper. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate and interpret the data generated from the survey. The raw numbers, found in the results section of this research, are reported in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Limitations and assumptions

It was assumed that all survey respondents, as well as those individuals interviewed, answered questions honestly and accurately. Another assumption was that those individuals closely reflected the perceptions of the groups they represented. It was also presumed that fire and police departments were similar enough to be surveyed together representing emergency responders.

Although the survey was sent to almost every police and fire organization in Oregon, only 30% the fire departments and 35% of the police departments responded to the survey. Furthermore, the survey only included Oregon departments and could have been expanded to other states. The survey recipients might have been based on similar demographics nation wide as opposed to geographic location. Respondents represented varying size departments, from all volunteer to over 100 career personnel. This disparity in staffing, budgets, and operational priorities was reflected in the responses of the departments. The final limitation noted was that not all respondents completed the text portion of the survey, which lead to unanswered questions.

Definitions

Asociacion Femenil – the Vallarta Women’s Association.

Culture – “the way of life of a people” (Thatcher, 1984, p.209).

Communication – the ability to give and receive ideas and information.

Customer – an individual to whom services are provided.

Latino or Hispanic – someone with Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish origin.

Less than very well – a subjective standard based on the individuals own perception of their language ability and reported by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Portland or Hillsboro metropolitan area – the population nucleus, and includes the adjacent communities.

Poverty line – annual income less than \$16,700 for a family of four.

Results

The results of the literary review revealed there are multiple forms of formal Spanish language training available in the Portland or Hillsboro metropolitan area. The local community college, Portland Community College (PCC), offers the following classes, First year Spanish, First year Spanish conversation, and Command Spanish. Each of these classes are available at all campuses as well as at their satellite facility located across the street from HFD's downtown fire station. The Command Spanish program can be taught in HFD's facility. Similar basic Spanish programs are also available through Portland State University (PSU) but are only offered at their main campus in downtown Portland.

Alternatives to these educational institutions are specialized training, available through private business, and self instruction, through books and tapes. The private instruction is tailored to the needs of the individual and both forms of instruction offer more flexibility to the learner.

The communication barriers that exist between HFD personnel and the Latino or Hispanic community have been identified as follows; (a) cultural differences, (b) mistrust of government officials, (c) high illiteracy rate among customers that only speak Spanish, (d) multiple dialects of Spanish, (e) hesitancy to communicate, or perceived shyness, due

to the inability to speak English, (f) HFD personnel's own bias and ignorance of the Latino/Hispanic culture, and (g) acceptance of inadequate or inappropriate translation.

The survey results show how other emergency services providers in Oregon have addressed this issue. A total of 131 out of the 412 surveyed departments responded: 83 fire departments and 48 police departments. This represents 30% of the 274 fire departments and 35% of the 138 police departments that were surveyed.

Figure 1 demonstrates that 67 departments (51%) report less than one percent of their employees are able to speak Spanish well enough to communicate with Spanish speaking customers. Only 10 departments (9%) have over 11% of their employees capable of communicating in Spanish. This compares to Figure 2, which shows only 31 departments (23%) have less than one percent of their population either Latino or Hispanic, and 32 departments (25%) have more than 11% Latino or Hispanic population.

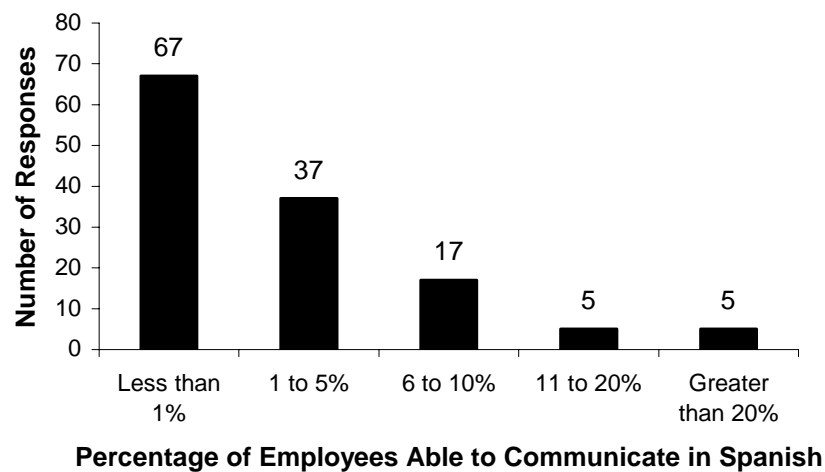


Figure 1. Survey respondent's assessment of the percentage of their employees able to speak Spanish well enough to communicate with Spanish speaking customers (n=131).

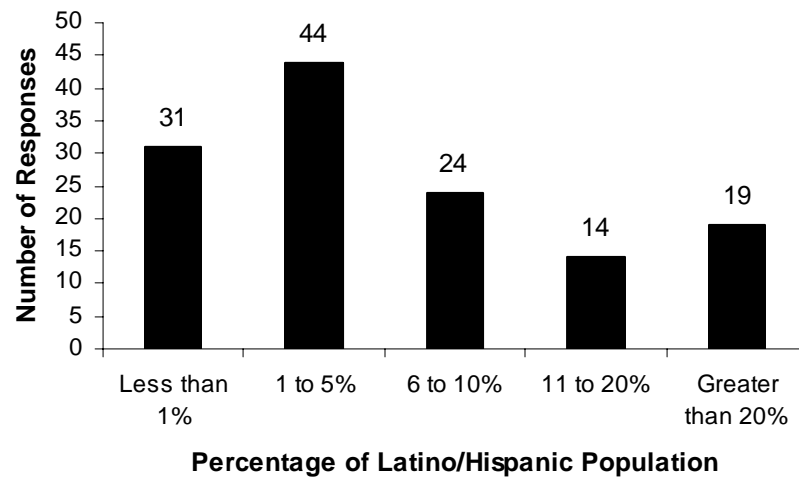


Figure 2. The percentage of Latino or Hispanic population served by survey respondents (n=131).

The survey inquired about three specific methods of enhancing emergency responder personnel's ability to communicate with Spanish speaking customers. These methods were the use of language aids or cue cards, financial support for language training and access to a paid interpreter service. The results, shown in Figure 3, identify only 22% (29) of the departments use language aids or cue cards. The percentage of departments having access to a paid interpreter service is higher at 43% (56) departments. Similarly, financial support for language training was higher with 44% (58) of departments responding to the survey, stating that they are willing to pay for this training.

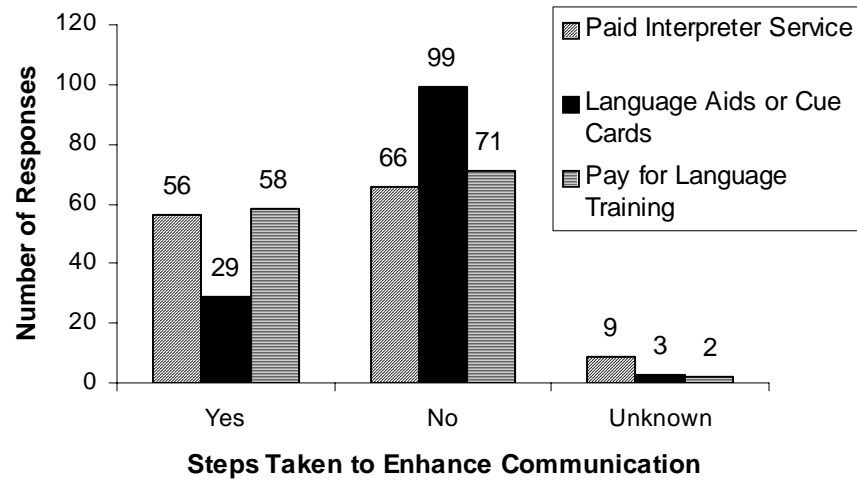


Figure 3. Three specific steps taken by survey respondents to enhance their personnel's ability to communicate with Spanish speaking customers. The use of language aids or cue cards, access to a paid interpreter service, and paying for language training (n= 31).

Over 55% (72) of those departments surveyed have not taken any steps to increase their employees' effectiveness in communicating with Spanish speaking customers. Figure 4 represents the perceived success of the steps taken by those departments which have taken steps to increase their employees' effectiveness.

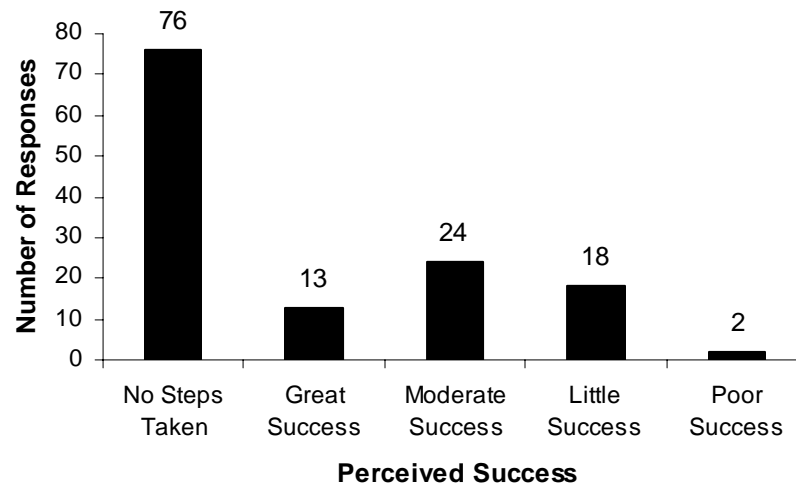


Figure 4. The perceived success by the departments that have taken steps to increase the effectiveness of their employees to communicate with Spanish speaking customers (n=131).

The survey asked respondents whether their department paid an incentive to bilingual personnel. If so what was the monetary compensation? The results showed only 27 departments (21%) offered incentive pay and the amount ranged from \$50.00 per month to five percent of base wages. Of note, 25 of the 27 departments paying an incentive were police departments. This is even more significant as fire departments accounted for 63% of the survey respondents.

The respondents were also asked if their organization recruited Spanish speaking employees, of which 48 departments (37%) stated that they did. In reviewing the text responses for this question, it should be noted that 28 departments did not explain their recruitment process. Of the remaining 20 departments, 11 noted some form of active recruitment of Spanish speaking employees. The remaining nine departments did not

describe an active recruitment process, but rather a non discriminatory process of recruiting anyone that is qualified.

Discussion

The Census Bureau shows that the City of Hillsboro's Latino/Hispanic population has increased by 213% over the last ten years to 13,262. In light of the 144% growth rate of the Latino or Hispanic population in Oregon over the same 10 years, the issue of communication with Spanish speaking customers is not unique to HFD (US Bureau of the Census, 1990, 2000). In the Emergency Responder Survey (Appendix), LaPine Fire District added to their responses by stating, "Sorry, nothing to share. If you come up with the magic answers, please share them with the Oregon Fire Service" (2003, LaPine, para. 14).

Providers of emergency services; police, fire, and emergency rooms, have been addressing the issue of enhancing their personnel's ability to communicate with Spanish speaking customers in a variety of ways. While they may differ in the specific approach, there are distinct similarities. This research revealed there is no single method to achieve this goal.

Warner (2000) recommended a five step approach; provide occupational training, pay an incentive to those who are proficient in Spanish, develop Spanish flash cards for use at structure fires and contract with AT&T Language Line.

Reed (1998) had very similar recommendations; on-duty language training, recruit community volunteers for assisting in bilingual training, pay for off-duty training and attract new employees that are bilingual.

The results of the survey (Appendix) showed that 44% of the responding departments offer some form of language training. Reviewing the free text responses, departments are offering both formal language training at local community colleges and conducting in-house occupational specific training. With regards to language training, Dees (1994) wrote, “With proper planning, departments can set up successful emergency Spanish programs either as a supplement to Spanish classes or as independent learning tutorials (p.110).

Formal language training is available at PCC and at PSU in a variety of formats. Portland Police Chief Kroeker praised Immersion programs for providing a great learning opportunity that requires the student to use and practice their skills (KATU, 2003). This being said, they are expensive and remove the employee from the work force for a prolonged period. However, the longer the student is immersed, the more benefit they receive.

Specialized or job specific language training can be accomplished by several methods. Private instructors, such as Clara Grebel (n. d.), offer job specific training and provide instruction on reading and writing as well as speaking Spanish. This is similar to the approach the Hillsboro Police Department (HPD) has taken. HPD has contracted with Claudia Rafael, a private instructor, to provide in-house training two nights a week. The instruction is provided at two different levels depending on the individual needs of the students and focuses on conversational Spanish with some reading and writing. Involvement in this program is open to all City employees at no cost to the individual or additional cost to HPD. Rafael charges a straight rate of \$50.00 an hour. There are also a

large number of books, on-line courses, audio cassettes, CDs, or combination of media that can be used for self-paced instructional purposes.

Among the alternative, or non-traditional, programs identified in the research, Command Spanish (2003) offers the most job specific training for the fire service, Survival Spanish for Paramedics and Emergency Medical Technicians and Emergency Spanish for Firefighters. These two programs can be taught in a combination format and are offered through PCC at either their satellite campus, across from HFD's downtown station, or at a location of HFD's choice. This program directly targets the needs of firefighters and EMTs when dealing with Spanish speaking customers. The "courses are not aimed at fluency, which takes the average English speaking adult about five years to achieve. Instead they cover basics..." (Sharp, 2001, para. 9).

Many barriers were identified that effect overall communication with the Latino or Hispanic community. If emergency responders do not recognize these barriers exist, they will fail to recognize incomplete communication. Dees (1994) points out the need to be aware of gender differences in culture and the importance of allowing a Latino or Hispanic to save face in conflict resolution. Others barriers that were identified by Nemeth, Hughes, and by Trujillo (personal conversations, 2003) were, (a) there are many different dialects, (b) there is a high illiteracy rate (especially among first generation immigrants), (c) the typical Latino or Hispanic that cannot speak English will be more shy in their interaction, and (d) very importantly, there exists a lack of trust in public officials. This last barrier may cause Latino clients to give incorrect or false information. Jimenez (2003) stated, "Regardless of economic success of entrepreneurs, trust is perceived as a major barrier to Latino immigrants utilizing existing services" (p. 12).

Translators offer a logistical challenge and, when used improperly, may result in inaccurate or simply incorrect communication. Trujillo points out that when children are used as interpreters, they are often frightened and do not have the maturity to deal with an emergency. Hughes agrees with Trujillo and added that an adult may be equally uncomfortable discussing medical issues with a child. Koff and McGowan (1999) also discourage the use of children as interpreters adding that children frequently cannot understand the content of the questions they are being asked to interpret.

Considering the issue of interpreter services, most survey respondents with access to paid interpreters utilize their dispatch centers for connection to a translator service. When a specific service was identified, it was AT&T's Language Line translation service. Many departments rely on bilingual volunteers or other members to provide translation. The Hillsboro firefighters interviewed for this research pointed out that even though an interpreter service is available to HFD, it is seldom used. This is an understatement of fact; HFD's records indicate that HFD's personnel have only accessed the service five times in the last three years. Instead, bystanders or family members (often children) are used for translation. As Perkins (1999) points out, this practice may breach patients' confidentiality as well as being in violation of their civil rights. An alternative to AT&T's Language Line is Integrity Interpreting Incorporated, the translation service used by Hillsboro's local hospital. This service offers timely connection, directly to the interpreter but only for Spanish translation.

Incentive pay for bilingual capabilities is a growing issue. Currently in Oregon, 27 survey respondents stated they offer an incentive pay for bilingual personnel. Several noted they were considering it in their next contract negotiations. The debate over who

should be entitled to receive incentive pay, what level of proficiency is required, and which languages are compensated has just begun. HPD does pay a five percent incentive to their personnel who are bilingual in Spanish, they have established a testing standard for competency, and currently, this incentive only applies to Spanish.

The survey results indicated that actively recruiting bilingual candidates for hiring or volunteering is not prevalent in Oregon. Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue (TVFR) related an interesting approach towards recruitment. They are considering implementation of Multi-lingual Incentive Points. For each candidate who can prove, through District approved testing, that they are proficient in another language, five points will be added to their final Civil Service Examination score. Other departments are taking into consideration the bilingual capabilities of their candidates and are advertising bilingual incentive pay. Two departments reported they advertise in Latino/Hispanic newspapers.

This research had indicated the HFD is not alone in the need to address the issue of communication with our growing Spanish speaking community. HFD's use of AT&T's interpreter service is very seldom used even though 5.6% of our calls are to Spanish speaking customers. The City of Hillsboro provides conversational Spanish instruction through the police department but it is not job specific to the fire department or its personnel. Involvement with, and in, the Latino or Hispanic community of Hillsboro has been limited to emergency responses from the suppression personnel of HFD and limited interaction from HFD's prevention bureau personnel. Cultural awareness is skewed and may tend to increase biases of our personnel when the only relative contact or interaction with the Latino or Hispanic community is limited to emergency responses.

Finally, the issue of incentive pay for bilingual capabilities is a contractual issue that would need to be addressed in contract negotiations.

Recommendations

This research indicates that HFD needs to develop a comprehensive plan to enhance the overall ability of our personnel to interact with the growing Latino/Hispanic segment of the population. A comprehensive plan must address immediate needs, short term and long term objectives.

The immediate need of HFD is to educate personnel regarding the appropriate use of translators and more importantly, the inappropriate use of children as interpreters. Employees should be expected to use AT&T's Language Line service if a qualified interpreter is not available. As the shortcomings of this service have been identified, the department should investigate the option of establishing a contract with Integrity Interpreting Incorporated. The ability of this service to directly connect to the Spanish interpreter, without going through the dispatch center, may overcome historical reservations regarding telephone interpretation. In addition, HFD has the ability to be actively involved in the quality assurance of this service due to the fact that the company and the interpreters are local. The research also identified the need for HFD to further evaluate the legal issues that Perkins (1999) addressed with regards to interpreters and compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. It appears that not only does HFD have an ethical responsibility, but also a legal responsibility to provide qualified interpreters for Spanish speaking customers.

Short term objectives should focus on cultural awareness and language training. Most everyone interviewed was in agreement, that to be successful in enhancing

communication, HFD must become more aware of the Latino or Hispanic culture. HFD needs to look for opportunities to involve its personnel in, and similarly, open the organization to, the Latino or Hispanic community. Two of the barriers identified in this research were personal bias and lack of trust in public service providers. People often fear or don't understand what they don't know. Our personnel are exposed to a small portion of the Latino or Hispanic community during an emergency incident and often are left with a negative impression. Situations they frequently encounter may be gang or alcohol related which reinforces this negative bias. Providing opportunities for employees to be involved in the Latino/Hispanic community in a positive way is one step towards counteracting negative perceptions. Relationships with the Virginia Garcia Memorial Center, the Boys and Girls Club, and Saint Mathews Catholic Church youth groups beg to be established.

With regards to language training as a short term objective, HFD should evaluate the efficacy of Command Spanish training through PCC verses participation in HPD's Spanish training. The cost of training through PCC may require addition to next year's budget. Participation in Command Spanish training would not preclude HFD personnel from attending the language training offered by HPD. In fact, HPD classes, which are not occupation specific, may serve to enhance Command Spanish training.

Long term objectives for HFD should include attaining language skills beyond the occupational specific level and recruitment of bilingual Latino or Hispanic personnel. HFD must decide on the type and level of support it will provide bilingual personnel including the possibility of incentive pay. Pat Semura, a PCC language instructor, maintained it was only human nature to desire payment for extra skills. She felt if an

organization wanted to provide that level of service, then maintenance of bilingual capabilities would need to be tied to an incentive (personal conversation, June 22, 2003).

Werner (2000) pointed out that:

Another appeal would be to the professionalism of the firefighters. A professional is proactive. He seeks the solutions to the problems arriving in the not too distant future. He acknowledges the diversity that is now American culture, seeks to find ways to better meet the service demands the American mosaic makes upon emergency services. (p. 42)

Survey results showed that supporting language training as a job related skill is more common within the police departments who responded yet the fire service has not embraced the concept of incentive pay to the same degree. HFD should continue to support traditional language training and encourage those employees interested in learning the Spanish language. Parameters must be established to define the department's level of support as well as students' obligations when receiving department financed education.

The recruitment of bilingual employees should be a high priority at HFD. Before the next eligibility list is established, community outreach and proactive recruitment needs to occur. HFD has never discriminated against a candidate based on ethnicity, but should strive to attract candidates that are reflective of the ethnic diversity found within the City of Hillsboro.

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