

# Overcoming Language Barriers:

## Solutions for Law Enforcement

Susan Shah  
Insha Rahman  
Anita Khashu

**COPS**  
COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

vera  
INSTITUTE  
of JUSTICE

## From Vera's Director

The number of immigrants living within the United States is growing. Unlike in the past, however, many are settling in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas, bringing new cultures and languages to places previously unaccustomed to such cultural diversity.

As a result, many law enforcement agencies around the nation are dealing with unfamiliar languages as they work to ensure public safety. Overcoming these challenges is essential. When language barriers prevent immigrants from, say, reporting a crime or describing a suspect, it becomes harder for officers to provide protection or gather evidence. And police often work in high pressure situations where communication needs to happen quickly.

This report draws upon real-life lessons from Translating Justice, a project of Vera's Center on Immigration and Justice, which worked with law enforcement agencies in California, Nevada, and Ohio to develop language access plans and policies suitable for their particular jurisdictions. The report provides practical guidance for how law enforcement agencies of different sizes, capacities, and circumstances can begin to address language barriers they encounter.

For more information about Vera's Translating Justice project or other technical advice on overcoming language barriers, visit [www.vera.org/translatingjustice](http://www.vera.org/translatingjustice) or call (212) 334-1300.



Michael P. Jacobson  
Director, Vera Institute of Justice

## Executive Summary

In order to do their jobs effectively and safely, sworn and civilian law enforcement personnel must be able to communicate with the people they serve—including the growing number of immigrant communities that do not speak English well.

While it may seem daunting to take on the task of overcoming language barriers, there are cost-effective steps that agencies can take. And these steps can be tailored to meet each agency's unique needs and capacities.

The practical suggestions offered in this report range from relatively simple—such as training staff on how to utilize telephonic and “ad hoc” interpreters—to the comparatively ambitious—such as pooling language resources among local government agencies. For those law enforcement agencies that are able to develop a comprehensive language assistance response, this report offers guidance on how to create language access policies, staff trainings, and partnerships with local community organizations to educate immigrant residents.

Whether or not your agency is able to implement all of the strategies suggested in this report, you will learn from what other departments have done. You may even be inspired to adapt these practices, adding to the growing list of innovations in this important topic in law enforcement.

“At the core of community policing are partnerships and problem solving, but those essential elements can be hindered if law enforcement is not able to communicate with the growing diverse population in this country. Recognizing the need to improve communication and interaction with limited English proficient individuals is among the next steps in advancing community policing. By developing and implementing a language access plan, law enforcement agencies will be able to strengthen their police-community relations, increase trust, and be better positioned to address public safety problems.”

CARL R. PEED, Director, U.S. Department of Justice  
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

# Overcoming Language Barriers: Solutions for Law Enforcement

<b>A Changing Population Requires a Change in Law Enforcement</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>How Law Enforcement Can Bridge the Language Gap</b>	<b>6</b>
Know Who You are Serving	8
Establish Language Access Policies and Protocols and Evaluate Success	9
Educate Staff About Language Access	11
Identify and Train Bilingual Staff	11
Notify the Public About Your Agency’s Language Assistance Services	13
Pool Language Access Resources	13
<b>It is Possible to Ensure Language Access</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Strategies for Your Agency to Ensure Language Access</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Resources</b>	<b>16</b>



Around five o'clock one morning, a police officer driving along Main Street sees a beat-up car swerve erratically as it approaches an empty intersection. The car slows but continues through the red light, so the officer begins to follow, turning on his emergency light bar. Moments later, the officer approaches the car on foot as the driver, slumped in his seat, slowly lowers the window. The officer asks the driver for his license and registration. “¿Qué?” the man replies, still slumped forward. The officer repeats his question. “No hablo inglés,” is the reply. The third time he asks, the police officer mimes the motion of removing a wallet from his back pocket. The driver reacts by opening the door and starting to get out. “Stay in the car and put your hands on the steering wheel,” the officer commands, abruptly. But still the driver does not understand.

Whether during a routine car stop or in a high stakes homicide investigation, as a law enforcement officer you need to be able to communicate effectively to do your job. Yet, as growing numbers of immigrants become more geographically dispersed throughout the United States, incidents like the one described above—where communication breaks down—are commonplace.

Law enforcement agencies of diverse sizes and means around the country are responding with a variety of promising and effective new strategies for communicating with victims, suspects, and witnesses who speak little or no English. Even where police departments and sheriffs' offices have limited resources and few or no bilingual officers, some have found ways to bridge the language gap and make services more accessible.

“Our population is much different than it was 19 years ago, when I first became sheriff. I’ve taken an oath to serve and protect all in my county, not just the ones who we can understand. There are so many times when a language barrier could cost someone his or her life.”

**SHERIFF GENE KELLY, Clark County, Ohio**

This report highlights a range of tools that law enforcement agencies can use to improve communication with non-English speaking persons within their jurisdictions. It draws upon lessons learned from a project involving the Vera Institute of Justice and law enforcement agencies in Anaheim, California; Clark County (Las Vegas), Nevada; and Clark County, Ohio, that was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. (For more information about this project, see About Translating Justice on page 6.)

## **A Changing Population Requires Changes in Law Enforcement**

In recent years, the United States has seen the biggest wave of immigration since the early 20th century. The number of U.S. residents born in a different country increased by 57 percent between 1990 and 2000, going from 19.8 million to 31.1 million.<sup>1</sup> Most of the new arrivals emigrated from Latin America, although many traveled from Asia and Africa. In comparison, Europe, once the primary source of immigrants, now contributes a relative trickle. Even faced with increased border, port, and airport security since September 11, 2001, large numbers of immigrants continue to arrive.

In another departure from the past, today’s newcomers are moving beyond gateway cities like New York and Los Angeles and settling in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas, attracted by greater economic opportunity and a lower cost of living. Latino immigrants—predominantly from rural Mexico—are now the backbone of the seasonal and year-round agricultural workforce in a growing number of rural areas across the Midwest and South. Western states, meanwhile, have seen growth in a variety of immigrant groups. More than one-third of the nation’s foreign-born population lived in the West in 2000; most were of either Hispanic or Asian origin.

Today’s immigrants bring with them a diverse range of cultures and, more critically, languages. The 2000 Census found that almost 20 percent of U.S. residents speak a language *other* than English at home, and 8 percent qualify as limited English proficient (LEP).<sup>2</sup> For public safety and social service agencies, the challenge of communicating and building trust with these new residents can be immense.

As first responders for public safety, law enforcement personnel face a special burden. Police officers cannot perform their duties well when they cannot communicate with the people they serve. When language barriers prevent individuals from reporting a crime or describing a suspect, for example, it becomes that much harder for police to gather evidence or provide protection. As one officer said, “Language discordance is our biggest challenge when serving the Hispanic community. The language barrier makes it very, very frustrating to get our work done.” Language barriers can even threaten the safety of officers: being unable to communicate with an armed suspect can dangerously exacerbate a life-or-death situation.

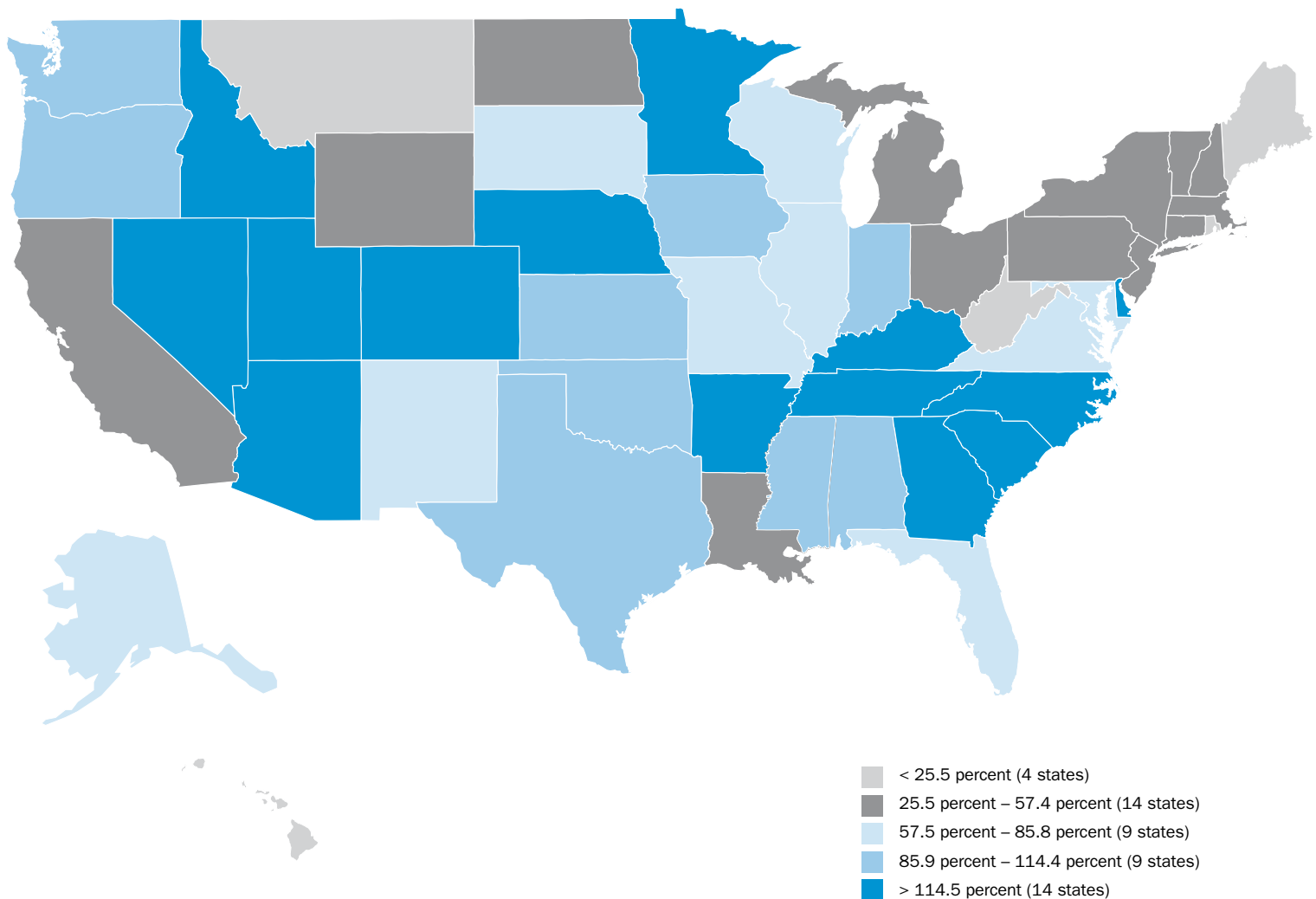
The obstacles associated with language barriers are often complicated by the fact that many LEP persons fear the police and go to great lengths to avoid contact with them. Especially in a political environment where immigrants’ legal status is a prominent issue of national debate, more and more immigrants—particularly those who do not speak fluent English—are staying away from public services and government institutions. As community members often explain, “Even with immigrants who are here legally, they are suspicious of and fear the police.”

---

## Glossary

- ▶ **BILINGUAL:** Able to speak effectively in two languages.
- ▶ **IMMIGRANT:** A person who leaves one country to settle in another. Motives for immigration can include economic, religious, political, or social factors.
- ▶ **INTERPRETATION:** The process of orally rendering communication from one language into another. *Interpretation deals with oral or signed speech.* Someone who interprets is called an interpreter.
- ▶ **LANGUAGE ACCESS:** A term used to describe an agency or organization’s efforts to make its programs and services accessible to LEP individuals.
- ▶ **LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT (LEP):** A person is LEP if his/her native language is not English and s/he has a limited ability to speak, read, write, or understand English.
- ▶ **TELEPHONIC INTERPRETING SERVICE:** An over-the-phone interpretation service in which off-site interpreters assist public and private organizations in communicating with people who are LEP.
- ▶ **TRANSLATION:** Changing a written text from one language into an equivalent written text in another language. *Translation deals with written texts.* A translator performs the act of translating.

## Percent Change in the U.S. Foreign-Born Population by State, 1990–2000<sup>3</sup>



Community policing programs, in particular, require police and the communities they serve to be able to trust each other and cooperate. Achieving this kind of relationship presumes effective and open communication between officers and residents, including those who are not fluent in English. The task of communicating and developing trust with LEP individuals may seem especially formidable, yet many law enforcement agencies *are* figuring out how to do this.

It is important to note, moreover, that federal law mandates that law enforcement agencies find ways to overcome language barriers. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 U.S.C. §2000d et seq.), police agencies that receive any federal assistance must take reasonable steps to ensure that their services are meaningfully accessible to those who do not speak English well. Not to do so could constitute national origin discrimination.

# How Law Enforcement Can Bridge the Language Gap

Whether your agency interacts with LEP individuals only occasionally or on a daily basis, you will find it useful to plan and identify language resources. The examples provided in this report illustrate how three diverse law enforcement agencies found ways to minimize language barriers. Each of the following sections highlights a different strategy and considers relevant issues for implementing it. All of the strategies highlighted here may not be appropriate for your agency's needs, but they do illustrate some of the varied ways in which agencies have made their services more accessible to LEP populations.

In addition to considering the strategies described in this document, you may also want to read Executive Order 13166 Limited English Proficiency Resource Documents: Tips and Tools from the Field, which is available online (see Resources on page 16). This report, developed by the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, includes information about language access tips, tools, and practices identified in informal surveys of court personnel, social service providers, police departments, 911 call centers, and several other agencies.

Which strategies you ultimately choose to pursue will depend on factors like your jurisdiction's LEP population, department size, and available resources. As patrol officers, 911 operators, and front-desk staff typically have the most contact with the public, they should be consulted as you develop and plan your agency's language access strategy.

---

## About Translating Justice

The Vera Institute of Justice launched its [Translating Justice technical assistance project](#) to respond to the need among criminal justice practitioners for strategies that can bridge the language gap between police and LEP individuals. Translating Justice provides tailored training, consulting services, and best practices research to law enforcement agencies faced with serving increasingly multilingual jurisdictions.

The project's services include demographic data analysis, qualitative research through interviews and focus groups, and strategic planning sessions with key stakeholders to identify and develop effective approaches to bridge the language divide.

In its first year of operation, Translating Justice collaborated with the Anaheim Police Department in California, the Clark County Sheriff's Office in Ohio, and the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department in Clark County, Nevada. While diverse in their size, available resources, and the populations served, all three sites were facing increases in their number of contacts with people who were LEP, and were committed to bridging the language gap between their staff and their jurisdiction's LEP residents.



# Profiles of Agencies that are “Translating Justice”

 <b>Anaheim, California</b>	 <b>Clark County, Nevada</b>	 <b>Clark County, Ohio</b>
<b>AGENCY</b> Anaheim Police Department	<b>AGENCY</b> Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department	<b>AGENCY</b> Clark County (Ohio) Sheriff’s Office
<b>CITY POPULATION</b> 350,000	<b>COUNTY POPULATION</b> 1.8 million	<b>COUNTY POPULATION</b> 140,000
<b>SWORN OFFICERS</b> 400	<b>SWORN OFFICERS</b> 3,000	<b>SWORN STAFF</b> 128
<b>BILINGUAL OFFICERS</b> 64 certified Spanish speakers 6 certified Vietnamese speakers Many more bilingual officers who are not certified	<b>BILINGUAL OFFICERS</b> 204 certified Spanish speakers No one certified in other languages	<b>BILINGUAL DEPUTIES</b> 1 Spanish speaker, working part time
<b>BILINGUAL CIVILIAN STAFF</b> 32 certified Spanish speakers 1 certified Vietnamese speaker	<b>BILINGUAL CIVILIAN STAFF</b> 84 certified Spanish speakers No one certified in other languages	<b>BILINGUAL CIVILIAN STAFF</b> No bilingual staff
<b>IMMIGRANT POPULATION</b> 50% of the overall population is Latino 7% Asian (including Vietnamese Filipino, Korean, and Chinese) Growing Arab/Muslim community	<b>IMMIGRANT POPULATION</b> 25% of the overall population is Latino 6% Asian (mostly Filipino, but some Vietnamese and Korean)	<b>IMMIGRANT POPULATION</b> Mexicans make up the majority of the new immigrant population
<b>KEY CHALLENGE</b> The immigrant community is multi-ethnic and multilingual. Anaheim is also home to Disneyland, a major tourist destination that attracts a year-round tourist population from across the country and overseas.	<b>KEY CHALLENGE</b> There is a very rapidly growing and diverse immigrant population drawn by the low cost of living and continuing economic opportunities in the gaming and construction industries. Las Vegas’ economic opportunities have posed significant recruitment challenges for the agency, particularly for filling uniformed positions.	<b>KEY CHALLENGE</b> Latino seasonal migrant workers are now remaining in Ohio year round due to the low cost of living and employment opportunities with local factories and the agricultural industry. There are few bilingual resources in the county.

## Know Who You are Serving

To be effective in fighting crime and protecting residents, a law enforcement agency needs to understand the changing demographics of the communities in its jurisdiction. Information about residents' characteristics and the languages they speak can help your agency make more informed decisions about allocating resources and recruiting and deploying staff. Your department should determine how such data can be easily collected and analyzed. For example, your agency could add a disposition code for all contacts made with LEP individuals when documenting an "event" into the Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system. Then, should the data show, for example, that large numbers of Spanish-speaking residents live in a particular area command, you might want to place a bilingual Spanish-speaking employee at that station's front desk. Agencies may also want to compare demographic data with data about how often police have contact with LEP individuals. This comparison could shed light on whether LEP populations are fully accessing services. Easy ways to gather this information include keeping a front-desk log for station walk-ins, routinely polling officers during roll call training, and analyzing call information from telephonic interpreting service providers or other language service providers.

For a more accurate picture of a jurisdiction's residents, agencies can look at demographic data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, city and state agencies such as departments of education and city planning, state and municipal court systems, local hospitals, and even marketing and research companies.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, you may want to look for information on race/ethnicity, language spoken at home, English proficiency, and education levels of the people in your command area. Keep in mind, however, that data on race and ethnicity cannot always tell

---

## Collecting Demographic Data

Your agency can get demographic data from

- ▶ the decennial U.S. Census and Census American Community Survey at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)
- ▶ federal, state, and city departments of education
- ▶ federal, state, and city departments of health
- ▶ municipal and state courts
- ▶ private research and marketing companies
- ▶ tables and maps of the 30 most commonly spoken languages at [www.mla.org/census\\_main](http://www.mla.org/census_main)

To gain a better understanding of rapid population growth in Las Vegas, demographers and city planners at the city's Department of Information Technologies purchased comprehensive 2005 demographic data from a research company. Using specialized mapping software, the planners plotted various demographic indicators—including race and language—within each of the county's seven police area commands. This data provided area command captains with a better sense of the immigrant population in their jurisdictions, helping them to plan and allocate resources to improve communication with LEP residents.

you precisely what language is spoken. There are, after all, as many Asian languages as there are Asian countries, and some countries have more than one language group. In India, for example, more than 30 languages are spoken.

It can also be helpful to supplement this demographic data with information gathered from community- and faith-based organizations and social service providers. These organizations—particularly those that serve new immigrants—can help identify emerging demographic trends that are too recent to be documented by formal counts such as the U.S. Census. Alternatively, it may be beneficial to use an independent organization to collect the data because community members may be reluctant to share demographic information for law enforcement purposes.

A growing number of police departments across the country are also finding it helpful to collaborate with their local city planning agency to collect and map this kind of data on an ongoing basis.

## Establish Language Access Policies and Protocols and Evaluate Success

Law enforcement agencies operate within a culture of policies and procedures. Agencies have policies on almost every aspect of an officer's job, from uniform dress code and instructions on when to wear a protective vest, to procedures for making arrests and use of force protocols. Not surprisingly, a growing number of agencies are developing policies for interacting with persons who are LEP. Without a written policy or protocol, a program or service is at risk of being implemented incompletely and, perhaps, incorrectly. A written language access policy can guide officers and civilian staff on how and when to use language services. It also formalizes a department's commitment to ensuring access for residents who do not speak English well.

The specific elements of your plan may vary according to your agency's resources and the LEP population served. In a policy guidance for recipients of federal assistance, the Department of Justice identified four factors that should be considered when developing a language access policy and plan: demographics of the population served, frequency of contact with LEP persons, nature of the contacts with LEP persons, and agency resources.<sup>5</sup>

**A growing number of agencies are developing policies for interacting with persons who are limited English proficient.**

---

## Developing a Language Access Policy and Plan

Ohio's Clark County Sheriff's Office recently developed a language access policy and plan. Recognizing that a growing number of Latino immigrants reside in the county year-round rather than just during the peak migrant worker season, the sheriff's office purchased handheld translators, secured a telephonic interpretation contract, and developed a volunteer interpreter roster of bilingual community members and city staff. This was done in conjunction with developing a language access policy, ensuring that staff uses the new language assistance services effectively.

Most law enforcement language access plans generally include the following:

- ▶ A glossary of commonly encountered terms (such as “language access,” “limited English proficient,” “interpretation,” and “translation”);
- ▶ A procedure for officers and staff on how to access language assistance services under different circumstances, including when receiving and responding to requests for assistance, making enforcement stops, conducting field investigations and witness interviews, conducting custodial interrogations, carrying out intake and booking responsibilities, and performing other law enforcement operations;
- ▶ A protocol for training personnel on the language access policy and effective use of the agency’s language assistance services;
- ▶ Information about training and certifying interpreters and bilingual personnel; and
- ▶ Information about how the public will be notified about the department’s language assistance services (see *Notify the Public About Your Agency’s Language Assistance Services* on page 13).

The Department of Justice Civil Rights Division has created two planning tools, available online, which guide law enforcement agencies in creating a language access policy and plan (see *Resources* on page 16).

To ensure that your language assistance resources are effective, it is a good idea to evaluate your services. This can be done in several ways.

- ▶ Uniformed and civilian staff can be asked—at roll call or through a short survey—how easily they are able to access language assistance services.
- ▶ Community policing officers and other members of your department who have daily contact with immigrant residents can ask community members how well such services are working and whether their family and friends know about the department’s language access efforts. (Reaching out to the

---

## Personnel Training on Language Access

Many agencies provide language access training to their staff. These trainings have different formats and focuses, reflecting each agency’s specific needs. During one of its monthly command staff meetings, the Anaheim Police Department collaborated with the Vera Institute to provide a two-hour training for department supervisors on the benefits of improving language accessibility.

In Ohio, the Clark County Sheriff’s Office collaborated with the Vera Institute to show its command staff how deputies and civilian staff can get the most out of using an “ad hoc” interpreter (someone, like a bilingual neighbor or family member, who has not received formal interpreter training). This training included the recommendation that family members or children be asked to interpret only as a last resort in unforeseeable or exigent circumstances. Clark County officials are also developing a roll call training that provides tips and tools for how to effectively use an ad hoc interpreter and what to do before, during, and after a situation when an interpreter is used.

community and seeking feedback will also demonstrate your department's commitment to community policing and serving all residents.)

- ▶ Community satisfaction surveys administered by either your department's staff or an independent organization can gauge how well community members are informed about your language assistance services and efforts.

Based on your evaluation, your department may determine that your language access policy or plan needs to be updated.

## Educate Staff About Language Access

As police officers often work in conditions that are high stress and time sensitive, language assistance services and resources should be easy for them to access. All personnel—from officers to 911 communication staff to front desk personnel—should therefore be trained on how to respond when interacting with LEP individuals. Training on how and when to request an interpreter, for example, can reduce delays that may arise on occasions when staff must choose between accessing a bilingual officer, a civilian interpreter, or a connection to a telephonic interpreter. The training should also emphasize how improving language access can make department members' jobs easier and safer.

Language access trainings can include:

- ▶ demographic information about local LEP populations and where they live,
- ▶ guidance on accessing interpretation and translation resources,
- ▶ tips on how to work with bilingual staff and interpreters, and
- ▶ instruction on what to do when no bilingual officer or interpreter is available.

Individuals who undergo training should receive tangible resources to carry with them in the field. These may include copies of the department's language access policy and procedure, translations of the Miranda warning (for officers who are fluent in those languages), and specific instructions on how to access a telephonic interpreting service. Staff should also be given a language identification card or booklet. This resource can be used to identify what language an LEP individual is speaking. Copies of "I Speak," a language identification guide for law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies, produced by the State of Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services, are available online (see Resources on page 16).

## Identify and Train Bilingual Staff

Some agencies have been able to successfully recruit, hire, and compensate staff with foreign language skills. However, levels of bilingualism among individuals can vary. The best way to ensure that a person is truly bilingual is to test his/her spoken and written proficiency in the other language. Some departments have

**Training staff on an agency's language assistance services reduces delays and makes department members' jobs easier and safer.**



partnered with other municipal agencies, the courts, or private language service companies to use their proficiency exams; other departments are developing their own proficiency exams that include law enforcement terminology.

Bilingual officers who serve as interpreters for their colleagues may benefit greatly from training on how to be a police department interpreter. Interpreter training can include information about:

- ▶ the interpreter's role and responsibilities,
- ▶ key terminology used in law enforcement settings,
- ▶ how to prepare for an interpretation,
- ▶ how to negotiate rank when interpreting, and
- ▶ how to maintain control during difficult interpreting situations.

Supervisors should be made aware that bilingual staff called upon to interpret for their colleagues may feel the pressures of an increased workload or find themselves routinely diverted from their normal work assignments.

As the nationwide demand for bilingual law enforcement officers grows, many agencies face challenges in recruiting qualified bilingual sworn personnel. Many departments, including the Anaheim Police Department and the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, offer a base pay incentive for Spanish-speaking staff who pass the certification test.

Some agencies have found that it is easier to recruit bilingual individuals to fill civilian positions such as dispatch operators, civilian interpreters, civilian report writers, and other clerical personnel. Bilingual civilian staff can also be used to build ties with the community and to serve as civilian public information officers. Many bilingual staff may already have relationships with immigrant residents in their community and may not need to spend time identifying key community service providers. Because civilian staff are not uniformed, they may have the added benefit of inspiring less fear among residents and more willingness to collaborate. In some instances, bilingual individuals hired for civilian positions may later choose to join the police academy to become a police officer.

---

## Using Bilingual Civilian Staff

The Anaheim Police Department targets local high schools and colleges with large immigrant student populations to recruit for its cadet programs. Bilingual cadets are often placed at the front desk of area command stations that serve high numbers of Latino or Asian residents.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department recruits and trains Spanish-speaking residents to become paid civilian interpreters for its Hispanic Interpreter Services Program (HISP). HISP interpreters are stationed in a centrally located substation and either drive to the scene to interpret in person or interpret over the telephone. They are recruited from local colleges and community organizations and represent many facets of the city's diverse Spanish-speaking population, including the Mexican, Cuban, Chilean, and Guatemalan communities.

## Notify the Public About Your Agency's Language Assistance Services

It is important to inform the public about your agency's language access policy and language assistance services. LEP residents who are unaware of language assistance services may not fully access them. The task of educating immigrant residents about your agency's role and services may seem daunting, especially when there is a language barrier. However, your uniformed and civilian staff can relay information to immigrant leaders and residents through community- and faith-based organizations or even local ethnic grocery stores and restaurants. Ethnic print and broadcast media and English as a Second Language programs at libraries and local community centers can also be information hubs for new immigrants.

Providing notice to the public often assists departments in connecting with community organizations, colleges and schools, religious groups, community leaders, and other language assistance resources such as local interpreters and translators, which can be of vital assistance to a department.

## Pool Language Access Resources

Most law enforcement agencies must deal with the reality of having fewer financial and personnel resources than they would like. Many simply cannot justify allocating significant resources or hiring full-time staff to provide language assistance. These agencies may, however, be able to pool and share their language resources with other government agencies. Separate government agencies often face similar challenges in serving a multilingual and diverse community. You might therefore consider collaborating with other agencies in your city or county—including first responder and emergency services, the departments of public housing and social services, and the courts—to share existing strategies, brainstorm new solutions, or create a pool of interpreters to be used by several agencies. Just as neighboring law enforcement agencies partner with each other to provide mutual aid, local and regional departments can coordinate to develop creative approaches for better communication with LEP residents and share resources.

---

## Pooling Resources and Leveraging Assets

**The Anaheim Police Department is one of 37 law enforcement agencies in Orange County, California. It routinely “borrows” Vietnamese-speaking officers from neighboring agencies that serve large numbers of Vietnamese residents, while smaller law enforcement agencies have used Anaheim’s American Sign Language interpreters. Anaheim’s city government, meanwhile, has assumed responsibility for providing language testing and bilingual certification, Spanish language classes, and document translations for all city agencies, including the police department. Leveraging neighboring agency and city government resources has allowed Anaheim police to address language barriers more comprehensively and cost effectively.**

# It is Possible to Ensure Language Access

The ultimate goals are to increase your department's ability to communicate and serve, to develop strong, trusting relationships with immigrant community members, and to ensure that officers can do their jobs effectively.

As immigrant communities and LEP populations throughout the nation continue to grow, police departments of all shapes and sizes are developing creative ways to bridge the language gap between officers and LEP individuals. The strategies and promising practices highlighted in this report represent just a few of the innovative approaches that are currently being used by law enforcement agencies around the county. In presenting these innovations, we hope to stimulate other agencies to address their own language gaps and, perhaps, inspire more innovation in this field.

The U.S. Department of Justice requires that law enforcement agencies receiving federal assistance develop strategies for communicating with LEP individuals with whom they do, or might, come into contact. Your department may not be able to implement all of the strategies described in this report. However, it is important to remember that developing a language access policy and a plan that actually puts the policy into practice can improve your department's performance. And, as noted earlier, it is a requirement if your agency receives federal financial assistance.

Whatever language strategies your department may choose to take on, the ultimate goals are to increase your department's ability to communicate with and serve LEP individuals; to develop strong, trusting relationships with immigrant community members; and to ensure that officers can do their jobs effectively. The bottom line is that all law enforcement agencies can do something so that their commitment to justice and service is not lost in translation.

---

## Endnotes

1. Migration Information Source, "Immigration to the United States by Decade; Fiscal Years 1821 to 2000," <<http://www.migrationinformation.org/GlobalData/charts/final.immig.shtml>>.
2. Elizabeth Grieco, "English Abilities of the U.S. Foreign-Born Population," (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, January 2003). <<http://www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=84>>.
3. Nolan Malone, Kaari F. Baluja, Joseph M. Costanzo, and Cynthia J. Davis, *Census 2000 Brief: The Foreign-Born Population* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, December 2003). <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-34.pdf>>.
4. In recent years, an increasing number of schools are reporting the languages spoken by students in their public report cards mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act.
5. The DOJ's Guidance to Federal Financial Assistance Recipients Regarding Title VI Prohibition Against National Origin Discrimination Affecting Limited English Proficient Persons can be accessed at <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/lep/DOJFinLEPFRJun182002.pdf>.

# Strategies for Your Agency to Ensure Language Access

- Determine the languages spoken in your jurisdiction by collecting demographic data from local and federal sources.
- Undergo a planning process to develop a language access policy and protocol guidance.
- Educate all agency personnel about language access and how to utilize agency language assistance services.
- Recruit bilingual personnel and offer a base pay increase for staff who pass a proficiency exam.
- Provide bilingual personnel with police interpreter training.
- Encourage officers and civilian staff to use their language skills.
- Train staff on how to effectively work with “ad hoc,” volunteer, and professional interpreters during an interaction with an LEP individual.
- Deploy bilingual personnel to areas with high numbers of LEP residents.
- Use bilingual civilian staff to conduct community outreach and build relationships between your department and immigrant and LEP residents.
- Translate signage and documents that communicate vital information to the public into the most prevalent languages spoken by LEP community members.
- Notify the public about your agency’s language access policy and language assistance resources.
- Pool resources and leverage assets with other agencies and services in your city or county.

# Resources

## Referenced Resources

*Executive Order 13166 Limited English Proficiency Resource Document: Tips and Tools from the Field.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2004. <[http://www.lep.gov/tips\\_tools\\_92104.htm](http://www.lep.gov/tips_tools_92104.htm)>.

*Planning Tool: Considerations for Creation of a Language Assistance Policy and Implementation Plan for Addressing Limited English Proficiency in a Department of Corrections.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2006. <[http://www.lep.gov/LEP\\_Corrections\\_Planning\\_Tools.htm](http://www.lep.gov/LEP_Corrections_Planning_Tools.htm)>.

*Planning Tool: Considerations for Creation of a Language Assistance Policy and Implementation Plan for Addressing Limited English Proficiency in a Law Enforcement Agency.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2006. <[http://www.lep.gov/Law\\_Enforcement\\_Planning\\_Tool.htm](http://www.lep.gov/Law_Enforcement_Planning_Tool.htm)>.

*“I Speak” Language Identification Guide.* State of Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services, 2005. <[http://www.lep.gov/ocjs\\_languagecard.pdf](http://www.lep.gov/ocjs_languagecard.pdf)>.

## Additional Resources

*Hispanic Robbery Initiative: Reducing Robbery Victimization and Increasing Trust of Police and Financial Institutions in a Hispanic Community.* Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, North Carolina. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, 2002. <[http://www.popcenter.org/Library/Goldstein/2002/02-08\(F\).pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/Library/Goldstein/2002/02-08(F).pdf)>.

*Language Assistance for Law Enforcement.* Curtis, Natasha. Seattle, WA: National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, 2006. <<http://www.najit.org/Documents/LawEnforcement200609.pdf>>.

*Protecting Your Community From Terrorism: Strategies for Local Law Enforcement.* Davies, Heather J. and Gerard R. Murphy. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and Police Executive Research Forum, 2004. <<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/mime/open.pdf?Item=1364>>.

*By the Numbers: A Guide for Analyzing Race Data from Vehicle Stops.* Fridell, Lorie A. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and Police Executive Research Forum, 2004. <<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/default.asp?Item=1476>>.

*Understanding Race Data from Vehicle Stops: A Stakeholder’s Guide.* Fridell, Lorie A. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and Police Executive Research Forum, 2005. <<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/mime/open.pdf?Item=1577>>.

*Racially Biased Policing: A Principled Response.* Fridell, Lorie A., Robert Lunney, Drew Diamond, and Bruce Kubu. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and Police Executive Research Forum, 2001. <<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/mime/open.pdf?Item=1598>>.

*Day Labor Project: A Community’s Response to the Problems of Casual Laborers.* Glendale Police Department, California. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, 1997. <[http://www.popcenter.org/Library/Goldstein/1997/97-22\(W\).pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/Library/Goldstein/1997/97-22(W).pdf)>.

*Disorder at Day Labor Sites.* Guerette, Rob T. Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Problem-Specific Guide Series No. 44. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2006. <[http://www.popcenter.org/Problems/problem-disorder\\_daylabor.htm](http://www.popcenter.org/Problems/problem-disorder_daylabor.htm)>.



“Latino Academy.” Kathman, Thomas E., and Tim Chesser. *The Police Chief* 72, no. 6 (2005).  
<[http://policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article\\_id=616&issue\\_id=62005](http://policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article_id=616&issue_id=62005)>.

*Translating Justice: A Guide for New York City’s Justice and Public Safety Agencies to Improve Access for Residents with Limited English Proficiency.* Khashu, Anita, and Cari Almo. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2005. <[http://www.vera.org/publication\\_pdf/342\\_619.pdf](http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/342_619.pdf)>.

*Building Strong Police-Immigrant Community Relations: Lessons from a New York City Project.* Khashu, Anita, Robin Busch, and Zainab Latif. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2005.  
<[http://www.vera.org/publication\\_pdf/300\\_564.pdf](http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/300_564.pdf)> or <<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/mime/open.pdf?Item=1576>>.

*Protecting Civil Rights: A Leadership Guide for State, Local, and Tribal Law Enforcement.* Markovic, John. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2006. <<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/Default.asp?Item=1814>> or <[http://www.theiacp.org/documents/index.cfm?fuseaction=document&document\\_type\\_id=1&document\\_id=862](http://www.theiacp.org/documents/index.cfm?fuseaction=document&document_type_id=1&document_id=862)>.

*A Suggested Approach to Analyzing Racial Profiling: Sample Templates for Analyzing Car-Stop Data.* McMahon, Joyce, and Amanda Kraus. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the CNA Corporation, 2005. <<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/mime/open.pdf?Item=1462>>.

“Reaching English-as-a-Second-Language Communities: Talking with the Police.”  
Moy, Jones, and Brent Archibald. *The Police Chief* 72, no. 6 (2005).  
<[http://policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article\\_id=614&issue\\_id=62005](http://policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article_id=614&issue_id=62005)>.

*Best Practices Guide: Developing a Police Department Policy-Procedure Manual.* Orrick, W. Dwayne. Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police, n.d. <<http://www.theiacp.org/research/PCDR.pdf>>.

*Talking with the Police: An English Language and Civics Workbook for English Language Learners.* Reta, Cathay O., and Martha A. Lane. Monterey Park, CA: Bruggemeyer Memorial Library LAMP Program, 2002. <<http://www.otan.us/images/publicarchive/ArchivesDigitalFiles/ELCivics/003369.pdf>>.

“Lost in Translation: Limited English Proficient Populations and the Police.”  
Venkatraman, Bharathi A. *The Police Chief* 73, no. 4 (2006).  
<[http://policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article\\_id=861&issue\\_id=42006](http://policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article_id=861&issue_id=42006)>.

## For Further Information

To access a federal clearinghouse of information, tools, and technical assistance regarding limited English proficiency and language services for federal agencies and recipients of federal funds, visit [www.LEP.gov](http://www.LEP.gov).

For additional information on advancing community policing and other law enforcement topics, visit [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov).

---

© 2007 Vera Institute of Justice

Edited by Robin Campbell

Design by Jeanne Criscola | Criscola Design

Cover photograph by India Baird in collaboration with Chief Peter Demnitz and the Morristown, New Jersey Police Department.



This report is a publication of the Center on Immigration and Justice at the Vera Institute of Justice. Additional copies are available from the communications department of the Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12th Floor, New York, NY 10279, or call (212) 334-1300. An electronic version is available on Vera's web site at [www.vera.org](http://www.vera.org) and the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services web site at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov).

The Vera Institute of Justice is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing safety and justice, promoting fair and efficient policy and practice, and working with leaders of government and civil society to improve the systems people rely upon for safety, security, and justice. Vera is a founding member of the Altus Global Alliance.

Suggested Citation: Susan Shah, Insha Rahman, and Anita Khashu. *Overcoming Language Barriers: Solutions for Law Enforcement*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2007. Available at <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov> and <http://www.vera.org/overcomelangbarriers>.

Vera Institute of Justice  
233 Broadway, 12th Floor  
New York, NY 10279

FIRST CLASS MAIL  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
NORTH HAVEN, CT  
PERMIT # 216