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Bridging the Cultural Divide:
Cultural Competence in Public Safety

Planning for limited English proficient callers may actually help increase knowledge of how to use emergency services, thereby reducing the numbers of misdials and hang-up calls, making the organization more efficient.

WHEN TAKING CALLS FROM FOREIGN-BORN and limited English proficient (LEP) callers, emergency communications center staff can make use of a few simple strategies and techniques to get the vital information needed in emergency situations and save time. The tips and suggestions that follow are designed to help increase your organization's proficiency in working with telephone interpreting services and handling barriers of culture and language.

Cultural Barriers: Awareness Is the Answer

In order to work effectively with foreign-born and LEP populations, it is helpful to understand the cultural and linguistic composition of the specific geographic area served. Many issues could influence the outcome of a call, such as:

- Fear of government and police
- Fear of deportation
- Fear of bringing shame to the extended family/clan/community
- Stress that the family will face eviction if police find too many occupants
- Lack of understanding that domestic violence is illegal
- Lack of familiarity with public services, such as 9-1-1
- Having a spouse who threatens to report a victim of abuse to immigration
- Dependence on an abusive spouse who speaks English and controls immigration papers

As an important initial step, consider having a member of your staff research the demographics of the area served, so that you can have a better understanding of which languages and cultures your service is most likely to encounter. Also, you may want to consider looking into cultural competence training programs. In a cultural competence program, experienced trainers will work with your call takers to help them gain the knowledge, tools and skills that will ultimately increase your organization's efficiency in dealing with foreign-born and LEP callers in times of emergency.

Please Hold

The following are phonetic ways to say either, "Please Hold" or "One Moment Please." We have written them out as clearly and closely to the sound as possible.

Arabic	Fadlan Entazer فضلا انتظر
Armenian	Hajetsek sbasel Հաճեցէք սպասել
Cantonese	Mm goi dang dang 請等等
French	Uhn mohmawn, sil voo play Un moment, s'il vous plaît
German	Ayn mohment beattuh Ein Moment bitte
Italian	Oon momento, pear fahvoray Un momento, per favore
Japanese	Shoo shoo o-machi kudasi 少々お待ちください
Korean	Jahm-shih-mahn kih-dah-ryoh joo-seh-yo 잠시만 기다려 주세요
Mandarin	Qing shao hou 請稍侯
Portuguese	Uum mall men tow, pour fahvor Um momento, por favor
Russian	Mi-Nootu, pa-Zhal-sta Минуту, пожалуйста
Spanish	Oon momento, pour fahvor Un momento, por favor
Vietnamese	Xin vui long jo mot choo Xin vui lòng chờ một chút

Courtesy of Network Omni.

Chart 1: Please Hold client reference card.

Case Study
Interpreting Vital Information

In the town of Truckee, located in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California, just west of the Nevada state line, a call came in on Monday, July 11, 2005. A horrific collision had taken place—a truck had run over a 4-year-old boy riding a tricycle. The collision took place in a mobile home park where the majority of residents were Hispanic with limited English proficiency. The Truckee emergency dispatchers immediately used NetworkOmni, their telephone interpreting services provider.

Lt. Daniel P. Johnston of the Truckee Police Department, incident commander for the tragic and fatal collision, reviewed the dispatch tapes and noted the professionalism and competency of the interpreting service, "The interpreter maintained a calm, professional demeanor throughout her translating. The people that called were hysterical, screaming and speaking very quickly. The interpreter was able to professionally keep it together and garner the information that the dispatchers needed to get the vital information to police and fire units."

With regard to how using an interpreting service can be helpful in creating the vital link between the emergency dispatch professionals and the first responders to the scene, Lt. Johnston commented, "The interpreter's actions helped the police officers and medical personnel prepare themselves before they arrived."

By partnering with a telephone interpreting company, the Truckee Police Department, which is dispatched via the Nevada County Sheriff's Department, is able to better handle its calls from limited English proficient members of the community, and its dispatchers and first responders are able to feel more prepared when dealing with emergency situations that involve callers with limited English proficiency.

Top Five Techniques for Call Takers: Effectively Handling Language and Cultural Barriers in Emergency Settings

There are many ways to address linguistic and cultural differences on an emergency call, but the following five recommendations may have a major impact on dispatchers' effectiveness in handling such issues.

1. *Conference-in the telephone interpreter as quickly as possible.* When trying to decide whether an interpreter is needed, it is best to err on the side of safety and add the interpreter to the line as early in the call as possible. Often, valuable seconds, even minutes, can be saved. If no interpreter is needed, he or she can be released. To ensure the quickest connection time, make sure that each phone is pre-programmed with a speed dial button for the telephone interpretation service that you use. Once you have connected to the service, request the language of the caller. If you are not sure what language the caller speaks, some telephone interpreting providers have agents that are specially trained to help identify the language for you in situations where the language is unknown.

2. *Use direct speech (first person) at all times.* Always speak to the caller directly, using the first person. The interpreter will render exactly what you say. For example, say, "Where is your emergency?" to the caller instead of saying, "What's his emergency?" to the interpreter. By using direct speech, you can decrease the call length, prevent misunderstandings and eliminate confusion about who is saying what. If your telephone interpreting provider does not use direct speech as part of their standard procedures, you may want to request them to do so, or consider changing to a provider that follows this industry standard, to ensure the clearest and most direct communication for all involved.

3. *Retain control of the call.* If you say, "Go ahead, interpreter," or "Find out why she's calling," you are temporarily giving control to the interpreter. Instead, direct questions to the caller as if he or she speaks English, so that you can state your words to the caller *through* the interpreter. Phrase your questions using direct speech the same way you would phrase them when speaking to an English-speaking caller. The interpreter will render your words exactly as expressed.

4. *When possible, avoid using children and other family members to interpret.* While children and other members of the family can often provide valuable information as a reporting party, it is never safe to assume that a family member of a caller could suddenly replace a qualified, professional interpreter. Even if the family member speaks English well, he or she may not be fully proficient in the other language and may lack interpreting skills. More importantly, a family member's emotions may prevent them from remaining detached and neutral, which is essential to the interpreting process. By using a neutral party to interpret, such as a professional telephone interpreter, you may also gain valuable information that would not be disclosed by the caller when a family member is acting as the interpreter. For example, a caller might be unwilling to mention sexual assault if a family member, especially a child, is being used to interpret. To provide the most accurate and neutral information possible, and to protect the caller's family from further emotional trauma, it is preferable to conference-in a professional telephone interpreter.

5. *Recognize and acknowledge cultural issues quickly and respectfully; then resume regular protocols.* Whenever you speak with a foreign-born or LEP caller, there may be cultural nuances at play. Some cultural issues may be complex and can influence the dynamic of the call. When you perceive that a cultural issue may be influencing your ability to communicate effectively, acknowledge it and stress the importance of answering the immediate questions first. For example, if the caller states that they are afraid that the call may bring shame on their family, it may help to say, "I hear what you're saying, sir, but right now I need to confirm that the weapon is underneath the bed." By acknowledging a cultural issue that may be important to the caller, even by stating, "I understand your concern," or "I hear you," you enable the caller to move past the issue and focus on providing the information. If no recognition is given to the cultural issue, it often encourages the party to continue speaking about it.

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Source: Corbis; Photo courtesy of Network Omni.

Language Barriers: Preparedness Is Key

The following are some ways that you can prepare for receiving calls from limited English speaking callers:

- *Obtain a document with commonly used phrases in other languages, and post it in a visible location.* This document should include a pronunciation guide that will enable you to say key phrases in various languages. For an example of such a document used by a professional telephone interpreting provider, see **Chart 1, page 62**.
- *Consider recording a bilingual or multilingual "hold" message,* or some other appropriate background sound, so that the LEP caller knows not to hang up while you are conferencing-in the interpreter. Some companies can record these messages for you using professional multilingual voice talent and provide them to you in a convenient electronic format, for easy implementation into an existing IVR (interactive voice response) system.
- *If the caller disconnects, call back with the interpreter on the line as quickly as possible.*
- *When conveying important information to the LEP caller, check for understanding.* If something stated by the interpreter indicates that the caller might not have a full understanding of the question, remember that the interpreter is merely rendering exactly what was stated. When this happens, you may need to restate the question to the caller in a different way, and again, the interpreter will convey exactly what you say. You may ask the caller to repeat information back in his or her own words to verify that he or she has understood.
- The U.S. Department of Justice recommends that dispatchers *obtain practice in getting interpreters on the line* to become familiar with the process. Trainers and administrators can include this as part of standard training, to ensure that even a brand-new dispatcher will be able to obtain an interpreter quickly and efficiently. Advise your telephone interpreting provider that you would like to conduct simulated calls for training purposes.

Key Phrases

Once you have dialed your telephone interpreting provider, it should only be a matter of a few seconds until you are connected to an interpreter. **Chart 2** shows key phrases in Spanish that may be of help to emergency call takers, if there is a need to speak to the Spanish-speaking caller during those few seconds while waiting for the interpreter to be added to the line.

It is important to remember, however, that an emergency call is not a good time for novices to gain practice in using a foreign language. Unless a bilingual dispatcher has proof of proficiency in the caller's native language, it is best to use a professional telephone interpreter. In order to obtain proof of language skills, bilingual dispatchers should be tested for oral language proficiency in the languages they intend to use while taking emergency calls. Some telephone interpreting companies also provide language proficiency testing services via telephone.

Remember, it is best to only use these phrases *after* the interpreting service has already been dialed. For additional resources and phrases in other high-demand languages, contact your telephone interpreting provider.

English	Spanish
Please stay on the line.	Por favor, quédese en la línea.
Please do not hang up.	Por favor no cuelgue.
One moment, please.	Un momento, por favor.
Police are on the way.	La policía va en camino.
The ambulance is on the way.	La ambulancia va en camino.
The fire department is on the way.	Los bomberos van en camino.
Ma'am/Sir, please calm down.	Señora/Señor, cálmese por favor.

CHART 2

Working More Effectively with LEP Populations—Three Helpful Steps for Organizations

The first step toward providing emergency services to LEP and foreign-born populations is to work with a high-quality provider of telephone interpreting services, to ensure that dispatchers have the ability to conference in a lan-

guage professional as quickly as possible to obtain the critical information required to dispatch help to the scene. This will help, not only to dispatch the appropriate services to the scene, but to also provide the first responders with the information they need in order to protect their safety.

A second important step is to raise community awareness by making sure that any public education materials are available, not only in English, but in the other languages commonly spoken in the community. To do this, it is best to work with a provider of professional translation services, to make sure that the translation is best suited to the target audience. For example, in Spanish, there are many regional varieties. Many terms, especially slang, can vary greatly from one country to another. A professional translation company can provide a translation that is "neutral"—a translation that is free of regionalisms, so that it will be understood by speakers from a variety of regions.

A third important step is to consider scheduling an onsite interpreter to assist whenever the department holds training sessions for the general public on topics such as how to use 9-1-1, among others. If the public educator speaks English only, but the community members speak other languages, an onsite interpreter can come to the facility and interpret the training session in person. This enables the department to actually advertise that the session will be held in other languages, too, to ensure a bigger turn-out and better overall response for the session.

In short, for the best overall effectiveness in dealing with LEP populations, it is helpful to work with a language services provider that can offer telephone interpreting, written translation services and onsite interpreting services, to ensure an all-encompassing strategy for areas with large groups of limited English proficient individuals. By planning appropriately and providing information, both in writing, and in person, to speakers of other languages, this may actually help increase knowledge of how to use emergency services, thereby reducing the numbers of misdials and hang-up calls, making the organization more efficient. **ENPM**

For more information regarding the full training program on Cultural Competence in Public Safety, contact ***Nataly Kelly****, product development manager at NetworkOmni Multilingual Communications (Thousand Oaks, CA) at (800) 543-4244, ext. 2227 or via e-mail at nkelly@networkomni.com. For more information about NetworkOmni's telephone interpreting, document translation and on-site interpreting services, call (800) 543-4244, ext. 2251, or visit www.networkomni.com.* ***Kevin Willett*** *is the Founder and Instructional Coordinator of Public Safety Training Consultants (Redwood City, CA). He can be reached at (800) 348-8911.* ***Marjory Bancroft*** *is the Director of Cross Cultural Communications (Ellicott City, MD). She can be reached at (410) 750-0365.*

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