

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/engaging-police-in-immigrant-communities-not-just-a-big-city-issue>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[Storm Lake](#) is a town of 13,000 people in northwestern Iowa. I became the police chief in October 1989 just as our town was reaching a demographic tipping point. At first, change came slowly in the late 1970s with the arrival of small groups of immigrants from Laos and various Latin American countries. But by the early 1990s, it just exploded, transforming our small rural community into one where now more than 27 nations are represented, 24 languages are spoken, and nearly 79 percent of our public school system (K through 12) is non-Caucasian.

Today when I go to the grocery store and hear Spanish, Lao, Vietnamese, Hmong, Sudanese tribal dialects, Portuguese, and other languages, I am reminded that it's not our immigrant neighbors who have to change in order to receive public safety services, rather it's up to me and the organization that I work for to change to protect their safety and due process rights.

Sometimes change reveals unexpected challenges. In my first few years as chief, our department needed an interpreter for an incident involving an Ethiopian family. With no Ethiopian interpreter available to the police department we called on a Somali interpreter to ascertain if he could help. We quickly learned that their languages are in no way similar and that the two ethnic groups didn't get along very well. From that experience and others, we learned that overcoming language barriers while essential, was only one piece of the puzzle.

Sometimes change can save lives. An analysis of our calls for service data indicate that the majority came from our ethnically diverse neighborhoods during the evening hours. In response, we have deployed our mobile command unit as a temporary substation in these neighborhoods. In addition to police personnel, representatives from the fire department and social service agencies are on hand to meet with community members and to answer questions. One evening, a Hmong resident came to the substation to report that a young Hmong man had been lying gravely ill in bed for over a week and the family did not know how to help him. Had we not been physically in the neighborhood and gained the trust of the community, I am convinced the young man would not be alive today.

Frontline stories like these inform a new report from Vera's Center on Immigration and Justice, [Engaging Police in Immigrant Communities: Promising Practices from the Field](#). The report profiles the practices of 10 law enforcement agencies from around the country, including Storm Lake PD, that have had success in cultivating effective police-immigrant relations. I've learned a lot through networking and discussing the challenges with representatives of the agencies discussed in the report. I sincerely hope the highlighted programs and practices can assist you and your jurisdiction.

Mark Prosser is the public safety director in Storm Lake, Iowa.

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