

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/overcoming-language-barriers-in-the-heartland>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Storm Lake, a city of about 10,000 people midway between Des Moines and Omaha, Nebraska, has the distinction of being the most diverse city in Iowa. This is largely the result of demographic changes experienced over the past 20 years. In the early 1990s, Laotian refugees resettled in the city and, later, Mexican immigrants arrived to work the local meat processing plants. I visited Storm Lake in August 2008 as part of a project to identify promising practices for overcoming language barriers in policing.

After a few days conducting interviews and focus groups with law enforcement personnel and city residents, I was impressed by the city's and police department's efforts to effectively communicate with the newest residents regardless of the language they speak. For example, the Storm Lake Police Department employs two bilingual Community Service Officers (CSOs) who speak Spanish and Laotian, respectively. Time and again, I heard how the CSOs had been vital in assisting the police department to overcome cultural and language barriers that might otherwise have handicapped efforts to solve crime or build partnerships with the community.

A year later, I see my trip to Storm Lake as a learning experience for many reasons. Apart from discovering that Buddhist temples and great Mexican food do exist in Iowa, I was impressed by how effective a small community can be in addressing language barriers. In the years to come, I look forward to seeing what other strategies Storm Lake develops to address an issue facing more and more communities, including those in the American heartland.

For more information on Storm Lake's promising practices, you can read our [Bridging the Language Divide](#) report or watch Director Mark Prosser, Storm Lake's chief of police, discuss the department's efforts in a [webcast](#) we hosted.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.