

Bilingual Dispatchers In Demand; Immigrant Population Growth Changes Needs

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Body

If you think fielding calls from hysterical people for a living might become nerve-racking, try tackling such a call in Cantonese.

"Sometimes you don't even know what language a caller is speaking," said Gerber Jimnez, a 911 **dispatcher** in Prince George's County. "It's hard to figure out who to send when you don't know what type of help they **need**."

As the number of **immigrants** who speak little or no English rises in Maryland, emergency communications centers are taking steps to hire more coolheaded **dispatchers** who can answer frantic calls in many of the languages that have flourished in the state in recent years.

Montgomery and Prince George's counties offer extra pay to **dispatchers** with foreign language skills. Both also rely on a national translation service called Language Line to field many of their calls. In June, Montgomery **dispatchers** used Language Line 892 times -- with the county charged by the minute. In the first six months of this year, the usage added up to 28,146 minutes at a cost of \$ 42,800, a police spokeswoman said.

"With the diversity in our county continuing to grow, use has continued to climb over the years," said Stephen H. Souder, director of communications for the Montgomery County Police Department. "At the same time, as we recruit a diverse workforce, more people are bringing language skills to the job."

According to 2000 Census data, 12.6 percent of Maryland residents speak a language other than English at home; that figure rises to 31.6 percent in Montgomery and 15.6 percent in Prince George's. As in the rest of the state, Spanish is the leading foreign language in the two counties.

Prince George's reported 1,087 Language Line calls during the first quarter of this year, a sharp increase from the 388 recorded in the same period in 2001. In fiscal 2002, Prince George's spent \$ 53,000 on the service, county spokesman Mark Brady said.

Charlynn Flaherty, the county's director of public safety communications, said part of the increase was necessary because translators at Andrews Air Force Base have been able to assist with fewer 911 calls since Sept. 11, 2001.

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Flaherty said the number of 911 calls made by non-English speakers has prompted Prince George's to reevaluate its hiring practices. "We've been definitely making an effort to attract more [bilingual] people," Flaherty said.

Effective this year, dispatchers who pass a foreign language exam will get a \$ 520 bonus at the end of the year. Montgomery dispatchers who demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language earn \$ 1 to \$ 1.30 more an hour than their colleagues.

Dispatchers in counties with fewer immigrants have also been affected.

"There was a time when we rarely used [Language Line]," said Capt. Lee Cornwell of the Anne Arundel County Fire Department. "It used to be a call every couple of months, then a call every month. Now, we're receiving one every couple of weeks."

Howard County police spokeswoman Cpl. Lisa Myers said dispatchers in the county use Language Line about four times a week. William Frazier, supervisor of the Charles County Department of Emergency Services Communications Center, said that although dispatchers seldom receive calls in languages other than English, in recent years "Spanish is starting to increase a little."

The census data showed that 14 percent of Howard residents speak a language other than English at home. In Anne Arundel, the percentage was 7.3 percent and in Charles, 5.1.

Language Line, based in Monterey, Calif., was founded as a nonprofit organization in 1982 by Jeffrey J. Munks, a former police officer in San Jose, who grew frustrated by his inability to communicate with recent immigrants in the Santa Clara County area.

"Overnight, we became dysfunctional," Munks said in a telephone interview, referring to one of the large waves of migration from Southeast Asia to Northern California during the late 1970s. "A lot of people ended up getting killed and imprisoned -- not due to malice, but simply because we didn't have the tools to communicate."

What began as a voluntary force of translators who were on call to assist police officers during emergencies in Santa Clara County snowballed into a private corporation that aids 911 dispatch centers across the country. Interpreters are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to take calls in 150 languages.

Dispatchers call Language Line by pressing a speed-dial button on their switchboard. In a matter of seconds -- 40 on average -- an operator at Language Line locates a translator. Once a three-way call is established, the dispatcher asks questions through the translator. Depending on the language and the time of day, the service costs between \$ 1.50 and \$ 2.50 a minute.

Beyond the language barrier, 911 dispatchers and other emergency response personnel in communities with large populations of foreign-born residents face other challenges, chiefly that many of the newly arrived are reluctant to call police.

"A lot of people think that if they call the police, [immigration officials] will get involved," Jimnez said. "What we've been trying to do is also get the word out to people that it's okay to call us in an emergency."

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