



USING LANGUAGES IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT CAREERS

BY PATRICIA KONING

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this issue of *The Language Educator*, we continue our series of articles on different career opportunities available to language professionals by looking at work in the field of emergency response and law enforcement.

When Richard Taylor interviews candidates for 911 telecommunicator positions, he starts with the negative aspects of the job. “Be prepared to work bad hours in very stressful situations,” he says. “This is a job with high turnover, in which you are going to face a lot of bad things.”

According to Taylor, only some people are cut out to work as telecommunicators, a term he prefers over “dispatcher” because they do much more than simply dispatch calls. “Telecommunicators don’t just connect callers to emergency responders. They have to assess the situation and get pertinent information out of people who are probably having the worst day of their lives,” he says.

While telecommunicators, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), police officers, firefighters, and special agents all have very specific roles and responsibilities, a common denominator in all these fields is the ability to communicate with many different people. For someone with a passion for a second language who also wants to serve the public, such careers can be a perfect fit.

RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES

Taylor worked for 10 years as communications director in a 911 call center in New Bern, NC, a career he describes as akin to being in a carnival—in an exciting, adrenaline-pumping way. He is now executive director of the North Carolina 911 Board and president of the National Association of State 911 Administrators.

“This can be an incredibly rewarding field because you are part of life-saving situations,” he says. “There is nothing greater than having a parent call you when their child is choking and you get the right person there in time to save the child’s life. And there is no worse feeling when it doesn’t go that way. Every shift is an emotional roller coaster, in which you experience either end of the rainbow.”

Many 911 call centers do use telephone interpreter services, but they cannot replace an immediately available bilingual person. “When

you conference in a third party to interpret, it slows the process. This goes for the on-the-scene response as well,” Taylor explains. “Language skills are a huge and growing piece of the first responder business.”

Monica Muñoz, who is now the public information officer for the San Diego Police Department (SDPD), started her career as a bilingual telecommunicator when she was 19 years old. She received additional pay for her language skills. “It was really a great job. I learned to communicate with people in stressful situations, and how to synopsize information so the responders had everything they needed as efficiently as possible,” she says.

Chris Cebollero, clinical services manager for MedStar Emergency Medical Services, agrees. “You need to develop rapport within the first 30 seconds,” he says. “Someone who can speak the language and understand an ethnic community is a real asset to any department.”

MedStar is based in Fort Worth, TX, and covers a service area of 421 square miles and more than 860,000 residents in Tarrant County. In that region are large areas of people with limited English proficiency; the most common languages are Spanish and Korean.

Cebollero says MedStar’s EMTs and paramedics receive some basic training in Spanish. “We try to give people enough language skills for basic patient care,” he explains. “So they can ask date of birth, does your chest hurt, and other questions to help assess the situation.”

Still, staff capabilities often fall short of the language needs of a community, especially in urban areas where 100 or more different languages are spoken. Cebollero says that bilingual paramedics and EMTs cannot be matched to calls where language skills are needed because teams respond based on geography and availability. Units with language capabilities are often stationed in areas where their skills might be used, but over the course of a day a unit might travel anywhere within MedStar’s region.

Telephone interpreter services such as Language Line Services are an invaluable resource in filling that gap. Language Line Services’

staff of 5,000 interpreters provide telephone interpreting and language solutions in 170 spoken languages across the country. The company also provides video interpretation, document translation, and interpreter training, among other services.

In 1982, a San Jose police officer who was frustrated by language difficulties on the job founded Language Line Services with a friend who was an instructor at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, CA. The company now has 20,000 clients worldwide. Dale Hansman, a spokesperson for Language Line Services, estimates that the company works with 70% of the 911 call centers in the United States. Language Line Services conducts extensive training and proficiency assessments of its staff; the company also provides such services through its Language Line University®. In addition, interpreters are trained for emergency, health care, insurance, and financial services situations.

"Recently, a trainer for 911 dispatchers spent two days training our top interpreters, who in turn trained our interpretation staff," says Hansman. "Training is a two-way street, as we train dispatch centers on how to best use our services."

The New York City Fire Department (FDNY) is an extensive user of Language Line Services. From January through November 2008, FDNY made 2,605 calls to Language Line, using 12,631 minutes and requesting services in 44 languages. The most predominant languages requested are Spanish, Russian, and Chinese.

PROTECTING THE PUBLIC

Several years ago, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) developed a linguist program to identify and certify members of service who read, write, and speak foreign languages. "We started the program very simply by just asking our officers if they spoke a language and making a list," says Chief Rafael Pineiro, head of the NYPD's Personnel Bureau. "Then we tested them to assess proficiency levels in speaking, writing, and reading."

In its first year, the program identified 460 individuals with language skills in at least one of 35 critical languages including Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, Fukienese, Bengali, Punjabi, Romanian, and Dutch. Those officers were placed in a database that is available to the entire NYPD and citywide administration.

NYPD has also extended its language outreach to recruitment and hiring. When applicants register to take the police exam, they answer questions about language capability. "Speakers of languages we need can get preferential hiring treatment," says Pineiro. "We've also increased our recruitment in neighborhoods where specific languages are spoken."

Today the NYPD has 764 certified linguists in 63 languages. "One of the remarkable things about the police department is the depth of foreign language talent. It serves us well in crime fighting, community relations, and in our counter-terrorism efforts," NYPD Commissioner Raymond Kelly said at a ceremony recognizing 80 NYPD members who possessed outstanding language skills.

The NYPD has such a deep linguist program that it shares the services of its linguists with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Secret Service, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and other government agencies. The linguists perform a variety of tasks, such as interpreting taped conversations in Albanian for the Secret Service, interrogating Urdu-speaking suspects for DIA, or assisting the New

York State Police Department in conducting background checks on job applicants in Hindi-speaking neighborhoods.

Beyond New York, in areas all around the country, police officers find a second language extremely useful on the job. Ruben Gutierrez, a bilingual police officer in San Diego, CA, considers his job very people-oriented. "You have to love the people and they have to love

THE CIVILIAN SIDE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

As the public information officer (PIO) for the San Diego Police Department, Monica Muñoz is a civilian, but her work is integral to law enforcement.

"I'm the spokesperson for the San Diego Police Department, so I'm in daily contact with the media about cases, investigations, arrests, scams, and anything else involving the department," she explains. "I also conduct media training for the police academy and new detectives and sergeants."

Contact with the media happens as frequently in Spanish as it does in English since Muñoz is in close contact with Spanish language media outlets in both Mexico and the United States. Having been born in Mexico City but raised in the United States, she works comfortably in both languages. Her mother, who taught Spanish to adults, insisted that she and her siblings study their heritage language in school so they could read and write Spanish and not just speak it.

Certainly the need for bilingual skills does not exist only in large urban areas. In Anderson, SC—population 27,000—Nora Puñales managed to extend a temporary job as a receptionist through her knowledge of Spanish. In an interview with the local newspaper, Puñales said her interpretation skills represent nearly half of her work. She was initially surprised by the number of Spanish-speaking visitors to the relatively small town's police department. "[People] come in, and I notice they have a problem speaking," she said in the interview. "When I talk to them, they say, 'Oh God, thank you for having someone who speaks Spanish.'"

In San Diego, Monica Muñoz worked as a 911 bilingual telecommunicator for eight years, experience she believes really prepared her for her current role. She continued as a telecommunicator part-time while studying journalism in college and working as a journalist. She initially worked as the PIO for the City of San Diego's Water, Transportation Engineering, and Planning Departments before the position with the police department came open. "This is really the perfect job for me," she says.

One of the most gratifying aspects of the job, she says, is when her outreach contributes to solving a case. "Sometimes a detective comes to me with a picture or video of a suspect that he has been unable to track down through other means," she explains. "I put the information out to the public and a few days later, the department gets some calls and they can close the case. It's very gratifying and I feel like I am doing a lot to contribute to law enforcement."

you. Great communication skills are essential," he says. "As a Spanish speaker in a city like San Diego, I feel I am a big asset to both my organization and the citizens. It is a much needed skill in an urban environment with such a mix of cultures."

Gutierrez joined the SDPD seven years ago after leaving what he describes as a rewarding and satisfying career in telecommunications. It all started when he went on a police ride-along. "I was interested in seeing what law enforcement was all about and what was occurring in my city," he says. "I was blown away. I saw a whole new side to the police."

During the ride-along, the officer that Gutierrez was accompanying responded to an assault with a deadly weapon. On the way to the scene, the officer was stopped by a woman who had the severely injured victim in her car.

"As I watched from the sidelines as a civilian, I was in awe at the composure of this single officer in dealing with such an intense situation—providing CPR, controlling the scene, requesting necessary resources for the scene we were at as well as the crime scene," he says. "The wealth of knowledge of this officer was amazing."

Currently, Gutierrez works in background investigations for the SDPD Human Resources Department. He interviews candidates, their family members, friends, and co-workers and conducts investigations on the applicants' backgrounds to determine if they meet specific standards. Previously, he worked as a patrol officer.

"I love communicating with the public. I learn so much from the people I deal with, and they come from every background you can imagine," he explains. "The best part of the job is working with the community. I may not be able to solve every single problem out there, but I can help. And sometimes all people need is a little bit of help and that has made it very rewarding for me."

Police officers, or peace officers as they are also called, work in a variety of capacities such as traffic, crime prevention, domestic violence, youth and schools, crime analysis and investigations, canine, and specialized patrols like harbor or airport. Nearly 100 different local, state, and federal agencies also employ law enforcement personnel, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Department of Homeland Security, State Departments of Fish and Game, and transit and rail agencies.

"Studying a foreign language can open up so many doors in the intelligence community and law enforcement field," says Margaret Gulotta, chief of the Language Services Section for the FBI. When hiring special agents, the FBI considers foreign language proficiency a critical skill, just like accounting, computer science, engineering, and intelligence. Currently, legal attachés working out of the San Juan, Puerto Rico field office qualify for incentive pay for substantive use of a second language.

The DEA seeks bilingual candidates to work as special agents and intelligence research specialists. Meghan McCalla, a DEA public affairs specialist, says familiarity with any language is helpful. "We have 83 offices in 62 countries, which represents the plethora of languages spoken and the DEA's appreciation of anyone with foreign language instruction and experience," she explains.



Two officers with the San Diego Police Department's mounted enforcement unit speak with visitors at a community event.

LANGUAGE TRAINING

The need for language skills in law enforcement and emergency response far outweighs the number of workers who come into the profession with those abilities. In response to this critical need, a number of occupational language programs, community colleges and universities, and specialized language companies—many founded by language educators—offer courses aimed at giving officers and first responders basic communication tools.

With regards to the most commonly spoken second language in the United States, the particular needs of public safety professionals may not always be met by general Spanish courses. Police officers, firefighters, and paramedics often encounter people who are agitated, angry, and afraid who use slang and profanities in their speech—sometimes as way to deceive officers.

The Atlanta-based company, Workplace Spanish®, develops and publishes job-specific Spanish and English learning tools for a number of sectors, including firefighters and EMS, law enforcement, and corrections officers. Police and fire departments all over the country use Workplace Spanish to train personnel; the FBI is another client. More than 400 colleges, schools, and adult education programs around the country also utilize Workplace Spanish's tools in their own course offerings, including East Central University in Ada, OK; Idaho State University in Pocatello, ID; and Lower Columbia College in Longview, WA.

Another provider of occupational Spanish training is Command Spanish® Inc., which offers its curriculum through online courses, books, and audio CDs, and licensed Command Spanish providers in 25 states. Ball State University in Indiana offers Survival Spanish courses for paramedics/EMTs and law enforcement officers through Command Spanish.

Teacher Kendal Knetemann started SpanishOnPatrol.com, an online interactive Spanish training program for law enforcement, corrections, EMS, firefighters, and park rangers, after teaching several seminars on Spanish to the Aurora, CO Police Department. "I was shown a video about a deputy who lost his life in the line of duty because of language. He didn't understand the slang that was being used," she says. "It really got under my skin and I decided I wanted to help."

A key feature of SpanishOnPatrol.com is the focus on slang and alert words. "We cover slang that indicates harm is on its way—

words that are vulgar, foul, or threatening in all Central and South American dialects and 'Spanglish,'" explains Knetemann. "The bottom line of this program is to empower officers with language so they can do their jobs effectively and safely. Having officers speak some Spanish opens the door to more communication; it will build and earn trust between law enforcement and Hispanic communities."

Knetemann spent two years researching the needs of law enforcement officers and emergency responders, research that included numerous ride-alongs and extensive interviews. She has a team of translators who represent different Spanish-speaking countries that review all materials to ensure the Spanish phrases taught to students are universal. "An officer probably doesn't know if he's speaking to people who understand Peruvian or Mexican or Nicaraguan Spanish, so he needs to use language that would be understood in all dialects," she explains.

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, located west of Denver, recently began using SpanishOnPatrol.com on the recommendation of several other police departments. In addition to Jefferson County's patrol deputies, detention officers, animal control officers, and records clerks are also taking the course. "We have a growing Hispanic population, so SpanishOnPatrol.com will help us better serve the

public," says Captain Robert Baker of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office. "That means recognizing alert words in Spanish that might trigger an officer's safety skills, communicating on a cursory level at a traffic stop, and bringing in an interpreter when necessary."

Knetemann is considering branching out into other languages. "Spanish is not the only language needed in the public sector," she says. "We are planning to adapt SpanishOnPatrol.com into other languages that are critical to public safety."

Like Knetemann, Alejandra Gomez was another educator who saw a need for language education specifically geared to law enforcement and emergency responders and she created her own company to fill that need. Gomez, a Mexican-born Spanish teacher living in Morgan Hill, CA, founded Public Safety Language Training (PSLT) in 1991. At the time she was teaching Spanish classes to Silicon Valley companies like Apple and Sun Microsystems. When she read a newspaper article about Spanish classes being given to her local police department, she realized there was an even greater local need for Spanish training.

"The class [they were] offered covered grammar, and not the practical information the police needed to do their jobs," she explains. The Redwood City Police Department asked her to develop and deliver a

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STUDENTS AS LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Jackson High School students work with firefighters in their community to help them improve their Spanish skills.

One Innovative Service Learning Project Assists Firefighters

In Jackson Township, OH, a group of high school Spanish students have become the teachers for the community's fire department. Jackson High School Spanish and French teacher Parthena Draggett started a program last year in which students in the Sociedad Honoraria Hispánica designed and taught Spanish lessons to local firefighters.

"Our honor society was looking for a service project that involved teaching others," she says. "Turns out, the deputy fire chief had told his grandson—one of my students and an Honor Society member—that he'd like to have the firemen learn Spanish as they'd had some communication incidents. Our local community college isn't offering classes like this right now."

For the first meeting, the firefighters talked to the students about the situations they had

encountered. Once when responding to an accident, the firefighters showed up and everyone, including the accident victims, scattered. "One of the first things we taught them was how to say 'We are not immigration. We are here to help,'" says Draggett, who is a new member of ACTFL. "Both the students and firefighters were real nervous at first, but the classes were a huge success. The deputy fire chief required three stations to take the classes."

Fire Chief Ted Heck says the classes were very successful and gave his staff an opportunity to better communicate with a sector of the community and provide services more efficiently. "The classes also permitted an interaction between firefighters and high school students that enabled both groups to exchange ideas, discuss generational differences, and see procedural standards the medics must follow to perform their duties," he adds. "The

end result has afforded our personnel a better understanding of the Spanish culture that has started to grow in our township and a better understanding of our younger citizens."

The students made CDs so the firefighters could practice over the summer. Now they are gearing up to begin the classes again after Honor Society inductions in November. The Jackson Police Department has expressed interest, as has a fire department in a neighboring township. After the project was written up in the local press and *International Journal of Emergency Medicine*, Draggett was asked by retired teachers and others to share her curriculum so they could use it in their communities.

"For the students, I think the relevance of what they are learning really hit home stronger than with anything else they've done," says Draggett. "They see the power of knowing a second language."

SO YOU WANT TO BECOME A . . .

911 Telecommunicator. No experience is typically required to become a 911 telecommunicator. To qualify, candidates need a high school diploma or equivalent and sometimes must pass a skills test. Most training comes on the job, and requirements vary by state and jurisdiction. Richard Taylor says that in his experience, knowledge of a foreign language can result in higher pay and faster promotion.

As of May 2008, the mean hourly pay for police, fire, and ambulance telecommunicators was \$16.99 and the mean annual salary was \$35,000. Salaries start as low as \$21,000 and can be over \$65,000 in major metropolitan areas. For more information, check with the personnel offices of state and local governments and police departments.

EMT or Paramedic. To work in emergency medicine, candidates must first become certified as an EMT by completing basic EMT training, which is typically offered through community colleges. Exact requirements vary from state to state. To maintain certification, EMTs must be working in the field and meet continuing education requirements. Paramedic training is offered through community colleges and some state colleges and hospitals. The training typically consists of 750 to 1,500 hours of classroom and field instruction (again, requirements vary by state). Many firefighters are also certified paramedics or EMTs.

Both the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) and National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians (NAEMT) have information about training and education as well as job listings on their websites. NREMT certifies emergency medical service providers at five levels: First Responder; EMT-Basic; EMT-Intermediate, which has two levels called 1985 and 1999; and Paramedic.

For both paramedic and EMT positions, candidates may be required to pass a physical exam and complete additional training after being hired. Salaries range from \$20,000 to \$50,000, but many EMTs and paramedics work overtime as well. EMTs and paramedics who are part of police and fire departments typically receive the same benefits as police officers and firefighters.

Firefighter. The minimum qualifications are being 18 years of age or older, passing a rigorous physical and written civil service exam, and possessing a high school diploma or GED. An associate's degree in fire science or emergency medicine gives candidates an advantage, as does knowledge of a foreign language. Potential candidates are screened through advanced testing and interviews; candidates who pass this stage must complete firefighter training, which typically lasts about six months.

The median salary for a firefighter is \$44,000 and can be over \$75,000. Pay in urban areas is much higher, for example the mean annual salary in Oakland, CA, is \$86,000 and it is \$77,000 in Newark, NJ. Many firefighters also earn overtime pay. First line supervisors earn a median salary of \$67,000 and fire inspectors and investigators earn a median salary of \$53,000.



Language skills can be a great advantage for paramedics and other emergency response workers, such as those shown here from the FDNY.

Police Officer. To become a police officer, one must be at least 21 years of age, have a high school diploma or GED (some departments now require an associate's or bachelor's degree), and pass a written exam, physical test, interview, and background check. Military service, education, and foreign language skills will help a candidate stand out.

Ruben Gutierrez recommends that anyone interested in a career in law enforcement learn about the different agencies and what they do. Once you become fully informed about where you might want to work, he says, become familiar with the agency. "Visit that organization and talk to the people who are doing the job. I highly recommend a ride-along," he says. "I had heard so much about what peace officers do, but I didn't really understand until I went on a ride-along."

Salaries for police officers start at \$30,000 and can exceed \$80,000, with a mean of \$51,000. Salaries for supervisors range from \$46,000 to over \$115,000 with a mean of \$75,000. Detectives and criminal agents earn from \$36,000 to \$100,000. Police departments typically have excellent benefits.

Special Agent. Becoming a federal special agent is typically a long and rigorous process. Candidates for the DEA must pass a qualifications review, written assessment and panel interview, drug test, medical exam, physical task test, polygraph examination, psychological assessment, and full-field background investigation.

The most competitive candidates are between 21 and 36 years of age, have a bachelor's degree with a GPA of 2.95 or higher, and possess specialized skills including foreign language fluency. Check your eligibility at the DEA's Special Agent Eligibility Quiz (www.usdoj.gov/dea/job/agent/bef_quiz.html).

To become an FBI linguist, candidates must pass several language ability tests and a background check. To become an FBI special agent, one must be a U.S. citizen and between 21 and 37 years of age, and have a bachelor's degree or higher and three years of work experience. Candidates must also meet specific physical requirements and pass a background check.

The starting salary for a DEA agent is \$38,000 to \$50,000, depending on pay grade and locality pay. Following graduation from Basic Agent Training, FBI special agents also receive Availability Pay which is 25% of the sum of their base pay. DEA employees (excluding political appointees) are paid according to the government's General Schedule.



PSLT founder Alejandra Gomez visits with a group of “Operaciones Tacticas,” a Puerto Rican special operations police group, at the National Latino Peace Officers Training Convention held in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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classroom-based course for their officers. Based on word-of-mouth recommendations, she expanded to teaching classes in 13 local agencies and developed specific courses for firefighters/EMS and correctional officers.

To reach a broader audience, Gomez created self-study audio courses, available as a CD or download, based on her classroom training experience. The self-study courses are integrated into all of her classroom-based courses as a learning aid and can be used as a refresher when the classroom sessions are completed. She also created instructor guides to enable bilingual officers or firefighters to lead classroom-based sessions in their own agency. Instructors receive mentoring and are certified by Gomez to teach the class.

Gomez’s classes are accredited by the California Peace Officers Standards and Training (POST) and her self-study courses are the only Spanish training courses reviewed and endorsed by the National Latino Peace Officers Association, the National Association of Hispanic Firefighters, and the Chicano Correctional Workers Association.

An important aspect of Gomez’s classes is the focus on understanding and appreciating other cultures, including their food. “Every time I present a class, I cook a different recipe from different states of Mexico or other Spanish-speaking countries,” she explains. “I also show movie segments or play music as a way to teach my students about Hispanic culture.” [Check the Recipes tab on www.pslt.biz to see what traditional dishes Gomez has shared with her students.]

“Language barriers are the biggest obstacle to communication between the police and some communities. People don’t report crimes or want to interact with the police,” she says. Clearly, anyone who considers a job where they interact with the public in high-pressure and often stressful situations—whether in law enforcement or emergency services—would benefit from facility in a second language.

As Gomez notes, “If someone can speak your language, fear disappears and trust is built.”

Patricia Koning is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The Language Educator based in Livermore, California. She covers education for the Livermore Independent and has written for numerous local publications on the wine industry, small business, and lifestyle topics.

FIND OUT MORE

911 Industry Alliance
www.911alliance.org

Association of Public Safety Communications Officials
www.apco911.org

Command Spanish
www.commandspanish.com

Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)
www.usdoj.gov/dea

DEA Jobs
www.usdoj.gov/dea/resources/job_applicants.html

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
www.fbi.gov

FBI Employment
www.fbijobs.gov

Firefighter-EMT.com
www.firefighter-emt.com

International Association of Women in Fire and Emergency Services
www.i-women.org

Kwikpoint
www.kwikpoint.com

Language Line Services
www.language-line.com

Law Enforcement Officer Salary Calculator (U.S. Office of Personnel Management)
www.opm.gov/oca/09tables/leocalcu.ASP

MedStar Emergency Medical Services
www.medstar911.org

National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians
www.naemt.org

National Association of Police Organizations
www.napo.org

National Association of State 911 Administrators
www.nasna911.org

National Emergency Number Association
www.nena.org

National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians
www.nremt.org

New York City Fire Department (FDNY)
www.nyc.gov/html/fdny/html/home2.shtml

North Carolina 911 Board
www.nc911.nc.gov

Public Safety Language Training
www.pslt.biz

San Diego Police Department Recruiting
www.joinspdnw.com

Spanish on Patrol
www.spanishonpatrol.com

U.S. Fire Administration
www.usfa.dhs.gov

Workplace Spanish
www.workplacespanish.com