Running head: OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Overcoming Language Barriers during Emergency Response

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed:_____
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Abstract

The problem faced by the Sioux City Fire Department (SCFD) was that many residents presented a language barrier to personnel during emergency response. This obstacle presented difficulties in obtaining vital information and, thereby, increased the risk to fire personnel and non-English speaking citizens. The purpose of this applied research project was to identify methods to overcome the barriers to communication and develop and implement a program that reduced these barriers between the citizens of Sioux City and the members of the fire department.

The research focused on methods to enhance the ability to communicate effectively with non-English speaking residents. Action research provided answers to the following questions: (a) How do language barriers affect public service providers across the country in order to provide service to their residents?, (b) What is the impact of communication barriers in Sioux City?, (c) What methods are being utilized by organizations to overcome the barriers to communication?, and (d) Which methods of overcoming language barriers are appropriate for citizens of Sioux City and the SCFD? The procedures utilized to answer these questions involved literature review of books, newspapers, journals, through sources such as libraries, EBSCO database, and the

Internet. An interview was conducted with a social service agency director to glean information from a local expert.

The results of the research revealed several methods used by various agencies. These methods included utilization of bilingual workers, telephone translations services, communication books, and local interpreters.

As a result of these findings, recommendations were made for a comprehensive plan. The components of the plan called for subscription to a telephone translator service, adoption of national standards for response to medical patients, training of personnel in Spanish, and development of a communication book for exchange of information between various languages.

Table of Contents

Certification Statement....2

Abstract....3

Table of Contents....5

Introduction....6

Background and Significance....8

Literature Review....11

Procedures....23

Results....26

Discussion....31

Recommendations....35

References....39

Appendix A: National Standards....42

Appendix B: Language Access Strategies....44

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Erica DeLeon....45

Overcoming Language Barriers during Emergency Response

There are many reasons why people choose to leave their homelands for the comfort of a foreign country. The ravages of war, economic distress, and a poor quality of life are just a few examples of the reasons for their emigration. Due to its perception as the land of opportunity, the United States has long been considered a haven for immigrants to seek a better way of life.

The influx of a diverse population of people can bring many challenges to a country. Immigrants to the United States have brought with them their customs, beliefs, values, and native languages. As a result, the United States has become a melting pot of diverse ethnic blends of cultures and languages. The retention of these customs by immigrants is frequently passed on from generation to generation. Communications between different sectors of the population can be difficult in a country where English is spoken by the vast majority of citizens (National Virtual Translation Center, 2007).

Organizations that cater to the public by offering products and services may encounter barriers to communication due to language differences. Public service agencies are not exempt from facing difficulties when encountering people who are unable to speak English. Fire departments face a critical challenge in

the course of their service to the public due to the emergency nature of their work. The preservation of time is often a critical element to effectively mitigate an emergency situation. Thus, the ability to communicate with the persons needing emergency assistance is vital to ensure a positive outcome.

The problem faced by the Sioux City Fire Department (SCFD) is that an unknown number of residents present a language barrier to personnel during emergency response. This obstacle to communication presents difficulties in understanding the nature of the problem. Since time can be a critical factor in mitigating emergency incidents, delays must be avoided in order to affect life-saving measures.

The purpose of this research is to identify methods to overcome the barriers to communication and develop procedures that allow the SCFD to mitigate emergency incidents in a timely fashion to prevent the loss of life. The action research method will be used to make recommendations for a comprehensive plan for the SCFD to bridge the gap in language differences between the citizens of Sioux City and the members of the fire department. The following research questions were developed to assist in the development of this plan: (a) How do language barriers affect public service providers across the country in order to provide service to their residents?, (b) What is the

impact of communication barriers in Sioux City?, (c) What methods are being utilized by organizations to overcome the barriers to communication?, and (d) Which methods of overcoming language barriers are appropriate for citizens of Sioux City and the SCFD?

Background and Significance

The composition of the population of the United States consists of many people who speak languages other than English. According to Shin and Bruno (2003), in the year 2000, the proportion of the United States population who spoke English “less than very well” was 8.1%. This percentage represents a population of approximately 21 million people who do not speak English in a fluent manner. This segment of the population is likely to increase as the U.S. Census Bureau (2008) projects that the United States will be more racially and ethnically diverse by the middle of the century.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007), the population base served by the SCFD is approximately 77,000 residents. The population of Sioux City has remained fairly constant over the past decade. The number of residents who speak a language other than English at home was estimated to be 14.9% of the total population in Sioux City (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The languages spoken in Sioux City are varied. According to the Mary

J. Treglia Community House, the most common languages encountered in Sioux City besides English are Spanish, Vietnamese, Oromo, Aramaic, Sudanese, German, and French (E. DeLeon, personal communication, December 5, 2008). The exact number of people who speak these languages without any knowledge of the English language is unknown.

The SCFD is comprised of 113 uniformed personnel with three civilian administrative personnel. Of the total number of employees, there is only one person who is fluent in the Spanish language. This person serves as the department’s Public Education Officer to utilize his fluency in Spanish when needed. There are no other members of the department who speak a foreign language fluently.

The vision of the SCFD is to excel at being a professional, progressive, and compassionate organization that exceeds the customer's diverse needs while embracing evolving responsibilities (Sioux City Fire Department, 2007). The fulfillment of this vision requires the SCFD to exceed the needs of the stakeholders of the community, regardless of their native language. As a result, the communication barriers between the members of the department and segments of the community have prevented this vision from being realized. A definitive link between the content of the *Leading Community Risk Reduction*

course offered at the National Fire Academy and this applied research project can be seen in a number of ways. This research directly relates to the keys to success for a community risk reduction process identified in the course by (a) providing strong leadership in the fire department for the community risk-reduction process, (b) engaging the community's organizations, leaders, and elected officials to determine the acceptable level of risk, and (c) basing the community risk-reduction plan on a local problem and local resources (National Fire Academy, 2007). Furthermore, the National Fire Academy states that community risk reduction is, "a community assessing its fire risks and hazards, and then developing and implementing specific intervention strategies to address those risks and hazards" (p. SM 0-19). As a result, it is the duty of fire departments to analyze its unique risks and work to reduce them.

This applied research project addresses several of the operational objectives of the United States Fire Administration (USFA). As stated by the National Fire Academy (2008), the five objectives are (a) to reduce the loss of life from fire in the age group 14 years old and below; (b) to reduce the loss of life from fire in the age group 65 years old and above; (c) to reduce the loss of life from fire of firefighters; (d) to promote within communities a comprehensive, multi-hazard risk-reduction

plan led by the fire service organization; and (e) to respond appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues.

As a growing issue for the SCFD, the ability to communicate in an effective and timely manner with all segments of the community will enable the department to meet each of the above-mentioned objectives.

Literature Review

The focus of this research was to obtain an understanding of the impact of communication barriers upon public service providers across the country. There have been many incidents in the public service sector where a lack of effective communication hindered the ability to provide assistance to a victim in a timely manner. The research of public service agencies centered primarily upon fire and rescue departments, law enforcement agencies, ambulance services, health care facilities, and communication centers.

Standards related to the delivery of health care to patients with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds were developed. A final report issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) outlined several standards that were the outcome of a project designed to support a more consistent and comprehensive approach to cultural and linguistic competence in health care organizations (see Appendix A for a

summary of the standards). The report summarized the standards by stating:

> The standards are intended to be inclusive of all cultures and not limited to any particular population group or sets of groups; however, they are especially designed to address the needs of racial, ethnic, and linguistic population groups that experience unequal access to health services (p.3).

Furthermore, health care organizations were defined as any public or private institution involved in any aspect of delivering health care services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

The influx of Latin American immigrants into Minnesota prompted a study to be conducted to determine the level of satisfaction that this population received during a visit to a medical clinic. Rogers (2008) concluded that the language barrier was identified as the key issue that emerged from the study that could have an outcome on patient care and satisfaction. The study further indicated that in addition to affecting the patient’s understanding of their physician, the language barrier also may affect a physician’s ability to understand a patient’s attitudes and values, especially in attempting to preserve cultural traditions (Rogers).

A study conducted across the United States discussed non-English proficient (NEP) or limited English proficient (LEP) patients in order to hear directly from physicians who treat this growing aspect of the population. The focus of the study explored physicians' experiences with their NEP/LEP patients, the kinds of challenges these patients posed, and the strategies and actions they have taken to address these challenges (Lake, Snell, & Perry Associates, 2004).

Lake et al. (2004) reported that the physicians in the study acknowledged that the number of NEP/LEP patients is growing. Some doctors welcomed this transition, some were seriously challenged by it, and others simply resented it. However, all physicians in this study indicated that clear communication with all their patients, regardless of race, ethnic background, or language is the goal (Lake et al.).

The consensus by physicians in the focus group is that patients will continue to diversify, leading to increases in the number of NEP/LEP patients. As a result, these patients will pose special communication challenges. However, the majority of the physicians believe they do not need to alter their methods to handle the increase in non-English speaking patients. Consequently, the group felt that the current techniques used with English-speaking patients can overcome most barriers to

communication that may exist. Furthermore, physicians felt that communication with all patients was a top priority and were proud of their ability to communicate regardless of their patient’s racial and ethnic background and their English proficiency. As a result, most physicians indicated that they were not planning to make changes in their practices, such as securing medical interpreters (Lake et al., 2004).

An article in the East Valley Tribune newspaper reported on the plight of the Mesa (Arizona) Police Department. The issue faced by this department was the inability to provide service to their citizens due to the large number of Spanish-speaking residents. According to East Valley Tribune reporter McDevitt (2007), there are not enough Spanish-speaking police officers to communicate with the high percentage of Spanish-speaking population in Mesa. Furthermore, she indicated that there were only five communication center operators out of a total of 120 employees to translate into Spanish the more than 99% of calls that were not in English.

McDevitt (2007) reported that the City of Mesa addressed the problem by resorting to a private service to translate calls made to dispatchers. The service, called Language Line, links the caller and dispatcher with a translator via telephone to provide instant help. The service provides translation in about

a half a second for Spanish while other languages take slightly longer. From September 1, 2006 to August 31, 2007, Mesa handled over 16,000 calls involving 23 languages. The total cost for the service during this period was $118,000 (McDevitt).

McDevitt (2007) further stated that the Mesa Police Department has developed a program to send Spanish-speaking officers to incidents when needed. The program, called Spanish Rover, encourages officers to learn Spanish for a pay incentive of 5% of their annual salary. At the time of the article, four officers had participated in the program. However, it was reported that the turnover rate in this program was high due to the extreme demand for their language skills for only a small portion of extra pay. The City of Mesa indicated that there was no immediate solution to combat the language barrier (McDevitt).

Shah, Rahman, and Khashu (2007) reported on guidelines that were developed as a result of a project with law enforcement agencies in developing language access plans and policies to address language barriers. The law enforcement agencies involved were from California, Nevada, and Ohio, where all three states have experienced increases in contacts with people of limited English proficiency (LEP). The guidelines established in the report were designed to be cost-effective and able to meet the unique needs and capacities of an agency (Shah et al.).

This literature review referenced the influx of immigrants in the United States between 1990 and 2000. During this period, an increase of 57% was seen in the number of United States residents born in a different country. These citizens emigrated mostly from Latin America, while many others were from Asia and Africa. Also, more of the immigrants were settling in suburbs and rural areas as opposed to the traditional influx to New York and Los Angeles. As a result, the estimated 8% of immigrants who were of LEP identified communication and trust as challenges with public safety agencies (Shah et al., 2007).

Shah et al. (2007) identified several ways to bridge to communication gap between law enforcement and LEP residents. The first key factor is to know the demographics of the population that is being served. Knowing the languages commonly spoken in a community as well as the cultures enables public safety agencies to allocate resources adequately and effectively. Information regarding LEP encounters can prove to be useful for future allocations of interpreters and additional resources that are designed to bridge the communication gap (Shah et al.).

An additional strategy identified by Shah et al. (2007) was to establish policies regarding language access and educate employees regarding these policies. These policies should include LEP demographic information, guidance in accessing

interpretation and translation services, and procedures of what to do when interpretation services are not available. Personnel that need this training should include all officers, communication center operators, and personnel who encounter visitors to the station (Shah et al.).

Individuals who possess bilingual skills should be recruited and hired to bridge the language barriers. Furthermore, incumbent personnel should be trained in various languages to aid in this process. Bilingual resources from other service agencies should be accessed whenever possible. Finally, education of the public in regards to the language access policies and services should be pursued (Shah et al., 2007) (see Appendix B for a summary of the strategies).

Marion County (Florida) Fire Rescue dispatchers have taken steps to bridge the language barrier in their county. Danenhower (n.d.) reported that emergency medical dispatchers (EMDs) in the county access a private interpretation service called Language Line. This service enables the dispatchers to access over 150 languages via telephone service within a few minutes. Translators working for Language Line provide translated information to the dispatchers in an effort to understand the caller’s emergency (Danenhower).

Language Line is a private translation service that is available 24 hours a day, every day of the week. This service reported translation of over 170 languages via telephone for a fee of $3.95 per minute. A toll-free number is provided to access their services and charges are sent monthly to the user of the service through an electronic bill (Language Line, 2008).

Raphael (2000) reported the development of a tool in use by the Santa Clara (California) County Fire Department to aide them in communicating with non-English speaking residents. The device, known as the Non-English Speaking Tool (NEST), enables fire personnel to communicate in several languages. Tim Jew, inventor of the tool and a Santa Clara firefighter, has encountered many situations where communication with patients was difficult due to language differences (Raphael).

NEST is a book of foreign phrases translated to English to enable firefighters to understand the needs of citizens. Community members fluent in the diverse languages assisted Jew with the two-year project. On the cover, the phrase, “What language do you speak?” is printed in all of the foreign languages. Victims point to the language that corresponds to their native tongue. Once the exact language is discovered, the user of the book turns to a corresponding section of the book specific to that language. The section contains many common

phrases in both English and the foreign language that are useful to firefighters. The phrases are divided into sections depending upon the type of emergency: fire, medical, and trauma. Crucial information, such as the number of people still inside a burning building, is relayed to firefighters by simply pointing to the phrase and reading the translated phrase in English (Raphael, 2000).

Raphael (2000) discussed a comparison between NEST and the AT&T telephone translation service. NEST allowed firefighters to receive accurate information in an instant whereas the phone translation service required locating a phone, accessing the service, and passing of the phone back and forth between the victim and firefighter. The use of NEST was found to eliminate the unnecessary rambling of an excited person by focusing the victim on a specific phrase (Raphael).

A Pennsylvania company, Premise Alert, announced a program designed to assist individuals with many types of communication barriers. The Premise Alert System allows families with communication challenges to voluntarily notify the police and other first responders about their special circumstances free of charge. Furthermore, the system helps police departments identify individuals with special communication needs, thus,

enabling the responding officer to have additional information (Premise Alert, 2008).

Communication boards are one aspect of the Premise Alert System. These nonverbal boards assist both professionals and people with communication difficulties. Many of these people are unable to make their circumstances known due to language differences or medical conditions such as autism, Alzheimer's syndrome, stroke, or traumatic brain injury. The boards contain images and text that both parties can understand and use to bridge communication barriers. The boards can be created for specific needs and for most ages (Premise Alert, 2008).

A personal interview was conducted with Erika DeLeon, Executive Director with the Mary J. Treglia Community House. According to E. DeLeon (personal communication, December 5, 2008), this social service agency serves as an advocate for immigrants. The services provided include assistance for the documentation needs of immigrants, coordination of English classes and workshops, and coordination of translation and interpreting services. This interview was conducted to gain insight into how a local agency handles the language barriers encountered in the course of their services.

There are several languages commonly spoken in Sioux City. According to E. Deleon (personal communication, December 5,

2008), these languages are English, Spanish, Vietnamese, French, German, Oromo, Aramaic, and Sudanese. Furthermore, she stated the people that their agency serves are of LEP. The Oromo language is native to Ethiopia and Somalia while the Aramaic language is native to the eastern regions of Africa (E. DeLeon).

Mary J. Treglia Community House provides staff that is proficient in Spanish. According to E. DeLeon (personal communication, December 5, 2008), immigrants who are seeking assistance from the agency and who speak languages other than English and Spanish present communication barriers for their staff. In these cases, the immigrants often bring translators with them. The translators are people in the United States that are known by the immigrants. Finally, the translation resources of the agency were offered to the author of this research project to assist in bridging the communication barriers for the SCFD (E. DeLeon).

A literature review conducted through the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy revealed three Executive Fire Officer applied research projects written about language barriers. Two of the three papers discussed barriers with Spanish-speaking people only. The third project covered the topic of barriers with non-English speaking residents in the

Okolona Fire Protection District, a suburb of Louisville, Kentucky.

Gosnell (2004) stated that the Okolona Fire Protection District encompassed a population of approximately 60,000 residents. The problem identified was that the district has experienced an increased number of fire and medical emergency responses involving non-English speaking residents. As a result of the research, three recommendations were made in this for the district.

The first recommendation made by Gosnell (2004) to the Okolona Fire Protection District was to develop a program designed to educate the members of the department in cultural and linguistic competencies. Next, the development of partnerships with other fire and emergency service agencies was recommended to assist in the bilingual training of firefighters. A needs assessment of the community was recommended as a necessary component to identify the non-English speaking population. Finally, a recommendation was made to provide fire safety education to the non-English speaking residents using community volunteer interpreters. The funding for the implementation of these recommendations was addressed. A possible solution to the lack of budgetary funding was made to seek grants at a state or federal level (Gosnell).

The literature review was critical in providing background information about the problem locally and across the country. Furthermore, a direction towards establishment of viable solutions to the problem has been identified. Agencies involved with communication barriers and their established methods of handling this problem provided a basis for the recommendations of this project.

National standards identified in the literature review revealed the need to establish methods of interacting effectively with non-English speaking citizens. A survey of the differing methods utilized by several organizations contributed greatly to the development of recommendations that fit the needs of the SCFD.

Procedures

The procedures utilized in the preparation of this applied research project began with the identification of a problem within the SCFD. The problem that had been observed in Sioux City for some time was the inability of public service agencies, specifically the fire department, to effectively communicate with certain segments of the population. The wide array of languages found among the residents in Sioux City presented challenges in situations where information was critical during fire and medical responses. Since the vast majority of the SCFD

speaks English only, the language barrier prevented timely intervention of the emergency event. Therefore, the purpose of this research project was to seek methods employed by various agencies to handle situations where language variations presented problems to clear understanding.

The inspiration for this research was discovered during the experiences of this author on emergency calls where limited information could be ascertained from non-English speaking victims. Additionally, news stories regarding similar situations in other jurisdictions supplemented the need to address this problem in a proactive manner before serious consequences resulted from a language barrier.

The initial research for this applied research project began at the Learning Resource Center at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland. A search conducted about the problem included retrieval of information from journal articles, books, and applied research projects. Several items of relevance were discovered from the resource center before departure from the two-week *Leading Community Risk Reduction* class.

In the following months, a research proposal was drafted that included the problem statement, purpose statement, research method, and questions to guide the research. Research was conducted during this time through several literary sources. The

Sioux City Public Library provided a plethora of information sources from which to choose. The topics searched included subject terms such as language barriers, communication barriers, cultural diversity, cultural differences, emergency response, and emergency communication. The library database, EBSCO, was used to access journal articles using the same subject terms.

Internet searches were conducted to unveil additional information related to the problem. The electronic database of the library of Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona was accessed extensively to further conduct research on the subject terms. Access to the resource was gained due to the fact that the author of this applied research project is a student at this institution.

A telephone interview was conducted as a last step before the initial drafting of this research project. The goal of this interview was to gain a perspective from a local agency that provides assistance directly to non-English speaking people in the community. The Executive Director, Erica DeLeon, of the Mary J. Treglia Community House was chosen as the interviewee for the hour-long series of questions (see Appendix C for a summary of the interview questions).

Limitations and Assumptions

Information regarding language barriers was abundant on a broad scope. However, as the focus narrowed to locate information specific to emergency responders, the availability of relevant information was limited. Furthermore, statistical information pertaining to the specific languages spoken in the community as well as the percentage of people who spoke these various languages was non-existent.

Due to the lack of demographic information, an assumption was made that the numbers of non-English speaking residents of Sioux City reflected the statewide levels. Also, the information obtained from DeLeon was interpreted to be factual based upon the degree of interaction that her agency had with non-English speaking citizens and immigrants.

Results

The literature review revealed many expected results in regard to the language differences encountered across the country. However, there were some unexpected discoveries regarding the standards in place and the methods utilized to bridge the communication gaps found in some communities. Furthermore, the various languages spoken in Sioux City were surprising to this author. The impact upon public service providers by language barriers is felt across the country. The

agencies that have experienced this impact include but are not limited to law enforcement, fire departments, ambulance services, communication centers, medical clinic, and hospitals. All of them have reported difficulties in understanding non-English speaking people during the course of providing services to them. The most frequent language barrier that was presented by the agencies researched involved the Spanish-speaking population. Not surprisingly, this segment of the population was responsible for the largest number of non-English speaking residents in the United States.

Service delivery to non-English speaking people was impacted by delays in initiating the service due to misunderstanding of information by both parties. Even with the availability of bilingual employees, translators, and translation services, delays were unavoidably encountered. Furthermore, the medical clinics and hospitals reported misinformation and lack of clear understanding in treating patients with LEP.

In Sioux City, the language barriers encountered were consistent with the national trends. The interview with E. DeLeon (personal communication, December 5, 2008) revealed that many additional languages were spoken in the community other than those expected by the author of this project. The African

dialects found in the community presented challenges to their organization as well. The specific interview questions and answers provided by E. DeLeon are summarized as follows:

1. Does your agency or an agency that you are aware of know what languages are found in Sioux City? In addition to English, we have found that Spanish, Vietnamese, German, French, Oromo, Aramaic, and Sudanese are frequently encountered in Sioux City.
2. What are Oromo and Aramaic and what country do these languages originate? Oromo is spoken in the African countries of Ethiopia and Somalia while Aramaic is a dialect from the eastern regions of Africa.
3. What are the percentages of people who speak these various languages in Sioux City? I am not aware of what the exact percentages are as we do not track this kind of information.
4. Are you aware of any agencies that track this information? No, I am not sure if there is anyone that does this.
5. What services does your agency offer to these immigrants? We provide assistance to immigrants who need help with documentation, sponsor English classes to these people,

coordinate translation and interpreting services, and serve as advocates for our clients.

6. Do you have translators on your staff? Yes, we have several people on our staff and other resources in the community that speak Spanish.

7. How do you communicate with those people that you do not have translators for? They bring in their own translators.

8. Since some of the immigrants bring their own translators, how do they know the translators? Oftentimes, they know people in the community that helped assist their journey to Sioux City. Obviously, they would need to be able to communicate with them.

9. Does your agency offer any type of English tutoring? Yes, we provide English as a Second Language (ESL) to the clients we see.

10. Is there a cost associated with these classes? No, the classes are entirely free.

11. You have indicated that your agency would be willing to contribute to a project with the fire department to bridge the language gap. What kind of assistance can you provide? It sounds like you have a worthwhile project. We can assist with translation services to your department by calling upon the resources we have available.

12. Are you aware of other agencies that could help with this project? I cannot speak for any other services but I know that there are many agencies who offer translation services.

The interview unearthed a valuable resource to the proposed solution of this applied research project.

The literature review unveiled that many agencies have established methods to bridge the language gap with the Spanish-speaking population. However, this limits the ability to communicate with only one sector of the population albeit Spanish-speaking residents are the largest non-English speaking segment.

The methods employed by the various agencies researched centered on communicating with Spanish-speaking citizens. Many agencies focused on training employees to speak Spanish. The communication centers have access to many other languages via telephone through the Language Line service. Additionally, translators are available in many communities but are usually limited to a few languages.

There seem to be several options available to the SCFD to pursue in order to bridge language barriers. However, many of the researched methods involve obtaining translation services that take time to access. As a result, only a few methods

identified could meet the objective of closing the language gap while maintaining a sense of time urgency. The critical need for information during a fire or medical emergency requires the need for quick access to language services.

Discussion

Prior to the onset of this applied research project, the SCFD had taken very little action towards bridging the language barriers with non-English speaking residents of the community. As a result, personnel who responded to fire and emergency medical calls were placed at a disadvantage due to the inability to deliver critical services to persons with LEP. The results of this research identified several options available to improve this situation. While there is no single method to accomplish this feat, a combination of events may prove to provide the best resolution to the problem.

The results of this research suggest to this author that the best approach to take is to improve communication with all non-English speaking residents. As the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) indicated in their recommendations of national standards:

> The standards are intended to be inclusive of all cultures and not limited to any particular population group or sets of groups; however, they are especially designed to address

> the needs of racial, ethnic, and linguistic population groups that experience unequal access to health services. (p. 3)

These standards were written to address health care providers across the country. Health care organizations were defined as any public or private institution involved in any aspect of delivering health care services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). The SCFD delivers health care services in emergency settings; therefore, a recommendation to apply these standards to the department is warranted.

Results of the research from an Executive Fire Officer applied research project and a law enforcement study recommended that many of these agencies utilize employees to translate languages, especially for Spanish-speaking citizens. Strategies identified by Shah et al. (2007) indicated that individuals who possess bilingual skills should be recruited and hired to bridge the language barriers. Furthermore, Shah et al. recommended that incumbent personnel should be trained in various languages to aid in this process. According to the findings of Gosnell (2004), the development of partnerships with other fire and emergency service agencies was recommended to assist in the bilingual training of firefighters. As a result, this research suggests the need to train members of the SCFD in other

languages. This would benefit the department by providing the quickest method of communicating with non-English speaking people.

During the course of the research, several tools used by fire departments and other professionals to communicate with non-English speaking people were identified. The Language Line used by some communication centers and law enforcement is an example of a tool that would aid in the communication process. The ability to translate the languages found in Sioux City is greatly enhanced by this service, since they provide translation in over 170 languages (Language Line, 2008). The relatively small fee per minute makes this an attractive option for the SCFD. However, there still exists a slight delay in accessing the service when time is critical in emergency situations.

NEST was developed by a firefighter for the purpose of enabling the fire department to communicate with non-English speaking residents in the community. NEST is a very useful tool that is relevant to the need of fire personnel for instant information in emergency situations. According to Raphael (2000), NEST contains many common phrases in both English and foreign languages that are useful to firefighters. Furthermore, NEST allowed firefighters to receive accurate information in an instant (Raphael). Since it can be devised for any group of

languages, such as the ones found in Sioux City, this tool could be useful for the SCFD in many types of emergency situations. As Raphael reported, the phrases are divided into sections depending upon the type of emergency: fire, medical, and trauma.

A project designed to create a local version of NEST could be initiated with the assistance of local social service agencies. As E. DeLeon (personal communication, December 5, 2008) stated, the translation resources of their agency were available to assist in bridging the communication barriers for the SCFD. Furthermore, E. DeLeon indicated that there are many agencies who offer translation services for the purpose of designing a tool similar to NEST.

The worthiness of a project such as this could prove beneficial in many ways for the SCFD. First, a major barrier to language understanding could be alleviated in an emergency situation. The tool could be created for any language encountered in the community. Next, the partnerships created with outside agencies can reap benefits in terms of public relations. Finally, the cost associated with such a simple idea would be minimal. There appears to only be a time cost associated with such a project.

The implications of the results of this research will undoubtedly have a great impact on the SCFD. Due to the

inability to effectively communicate with certain segments of the community, recommendations that are implemented will have a positive impact on bridging the gap between differences in language.

Recommendations

The research indicates that the SCFD needs to develop and implement a comprehensive plan to better communicate with the non-English speaking population in the community. The components of this plan must address the immediate need to reduce language barriers as well as a long-term strategy to overcome this problem. As a result of this research, several recommendations have been made to the SCFD to address this issue.

The first recommendation is to subscribe to the Language Line service for use by fire personnel in the field. All company personnel have availability of a cell phone assigned to their apparatus in order to access this service. The cost associated with providing this option is minimal at $3.95 per minute (Language Line, 2008). It is anticipated that this would not impact the budget of the department to a great degree. Although the implementation of this recommendation does not resolve the problem identified in the most effective manner, it does provide an immediate action that can reduce some time delays in translation.

Next, the SCFD should adopt the national standards developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The conformity with the standards will ensure that the SCFD is addressing the needs of all of its customers in regards to its delivery of emergency medical services. While compliance with all of these standards will take time to complete, the benefit will be positive for the stakeholders of the community. Once again, the financial burden of this recommendation would be minimal upon the budget of the department.

Another recommendation that will serve to meet the goals of a comprehensive plan is to train fire personnel in other languages found in Sioux City. Since Spanish is the most common language besides English that is encountered in the community, bilingual training in this language would provide the most impact. The identification of personnel who would need to learn Spanish is to be determined. Further research into the logistics of this recommendation would need to occur before implementation can be fully completed. However, a resource that can be utilized to assist with this recommendation is the access of bilingual services through social agencies such as the Mary J. Treglia Community House. A partnership development with several agencies can be beneficial for all agencies through better service delivery to our common customers.

Finally, the development of a communication tool similar to the NEST is necessary as a resource for personnel to utilize during response to fire and medical emergencies. This tool would allow the users to quickly convert foreign phrases into useful information through pictures and text. The languages contained within this communication tool would reflect the languages found in the community. The development of this recommendation can occur with the assistance of the staff and resources of the Mary J. Treglia Community House. As E. DeLeon indicated, her agency would be available to provide any assistance that we would need for the development of such a project (personal communication, December 5, 2008). The implementation of this recommendation would take many hours to complete but the cost is minimal and the partnership is invaluable.

The presentation of these recommendations was received positively by the Chief of the SCFD. As a result, the author of this applied research project was encouraged to pursue these recommendations and report the progress periodically to the Staff of the department.

With the growing number of immigrants in the United States, many communities will be able to draw parallels to the problem identified in this project. Therefore, future readers of this applied research project can benefit from conducting research in

their own communities regarding the demographics of their population. Identifying the various languages spoken in their community, researching methods used in other communities, and implementing a combination of methods in their community will enable communication barriers to be easily broken down.

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Appendix A

National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health Care

1. Health care organizations should ensure that patients/consumers receive from all staff members effective, understandable, and respectful care that is provided in a manner compatible with their cultural health beliefs and practices and preferred language
2. Health care organizations should implement strategies to recruit, retain, and promote at all levels of the organization a diverse staff and leadership that are representative of the demographic characteristics of the service area.
3. Health care organizations should ensure that staff at all levels and across all disciplines receive ongoing education and training in culturally and linguistically appropriate service delivery.
4. Health care organizations must offer and provide language assistance services, including bilingual staff and interpreter services, at no cost to each patient/consumer with limited English proficiency at all points of contact, in a timely manner during all hours of operation.
5. Health care organizations must provide to patients/consumers in their preferred language both verbal offers and written notices informing them of their right to receive language assistance services.
6. Health care organizations must assure the competence of language assistance provided to limited English proficient patients/consumers by interpreters and bilingual staff. Family and friends should not be used to provide interpretation services (except on request by the patient/consumer).
7. Health care organizations must make available easily understood patient-related materials and post signage in the languages of the commonly encountered groups and/or groups represented in the service area.
8. Health care organizations should develop, implement, and promote a written strategic plan that outlines clear goals, policies, operational plans, and management accountability/oversight mechanisms to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services.
9. Health care organizations should conduct initial and ongoing organizational self-assessments of CLAS-related activities and are encouraged to integrate cultural and linguistic competence-related measures into their internal audits, performance improvement programs, patient satisfaction assessments, and outcomes-based evaluations.
10. Health care organizations should ensure that data on the individual patient’s/consumer’s race, ethnicity, and spoken and written language are collected in health records, integrated into the organization’s management information systems, and periodically updated.
11. Health care organizations should maintain a current demographic, cultural, and epidemiological profile of the community as well as a needs assessment to accurately plan for and implement services that respond to the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the service area.

12. Health care organizations should develop participatory, collaborative partnerships with communities and utilize a variety of formal and informal mechanisms to facilitate community and patient/consumer involvement in designing and implementing CLAS-related activities.
13. Health care organizations should ensure that conflict and grievance resolution processes are culturally and linguistically sensitive and capable of identifying, preventing, and resolving cross-cultural conflicts or complaints by patients/consumers.
14. Health care organizations are encouraged to regularly make available to the public information about their progress and successful innovations in implementing the CLAS standards and to provide public notice in their communities about the availability of this information.

Appendix B

Strategies for Your Agency to Ensure Language Access

- Determine the languages spoken in your jurisdiction by collecting demographic data from local and federal sources.
- Undergo a planning process to develop a language access policy and protocol guidance.
- Educate all agency personnel about language access and how to utilize agency language assistance services.
- Recruit bilingual personnel and offer a base pay increase for staff who pass a proficiency exam.
- Provide bilingual personnel with police interpreter training.
- Encourage officers and civilian staff to use their language skills.
- Train staff on how to effectively work with “ad hoc,” volunteer, and professional interpreters during an interaction with an LEP individual.
- Deploy bilingual personnel to areas with high numbers of LEP residents.
- Use bilingual civilian staff to conduct community outreach and build relationships between your department and immigrant and LEP residents.
- Translate signage and documents that communicate vital information to the public into the most prevalent languages spoken by LEP community members.
- Notify the public about your agency’s language access policy and language assistance resources.
- Pool resources and leverage assets with other agencies and services in your city or county.

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Erica DeLeon

- Does your agency or an agency that you are aware of know what languages are found in Sioux City?
- What are Oromo and Aramaic and what country do these languages originate?
- What are the percentages of people who speak these various languages in Sioux City?
- Are you aware of any agencies that track this information?
- What services does your agency offer to these immigrants?
- Do you have translators on your staff?
- How do you communicate with those people that you do not have translators for?
- Since some of the immigrants bring their own translators, how do they know the translators?
- Does your agency offer any type of English tutoring?
- Is there a cost associated with these classes?
- You have indicated that your agency would be willing to contribute to a project with the fire department to bridge the language gap. What kind of assistance can you provide?
- Are you aware of other agencies that could help with this project?