

Bridging the Gap: Engaging Volunteers in Multicultural Outreach

According to the 2008 U.S. Census American Community Survey, of the 304 million persons in the United States, 12.5 percent were foreign born. This rapid growth in immigrant populations is expected to continue to increase.

Many immigrants come from developing countries, where the image of law enforcement is very different from that of the United States. Often the police in these countries are seen as corrupt, ineffective, even violent. With these negative associations and fears of investigation into their own or their family's immigration status, many immigrants are afraid to come forward to the police to report crimes. Issues of theft, domestic violence, sexual assault, and gang activities are consistently underreported within immigrant communities. Given their hesitance to report crimes, in addition to language barriers and unfamiliarity with local culture, immigrants are often easy targets for those with criminal intentions.

With this changing cultural landscape, many law enforcement agencies are building trust and preventing crime by reaching out to immigrant communities. Volunteers can be a key resource for law enforcement in building relationships with diverse communities and helping to empower immigrant groups to overcome their

fear of law enforcement. This issue of VIPS in Focus highlights four departments that have engaged volunteers to bring their language skills, cultural knowledge, and enthusiasm for public safety to multicultural outreach efforts.



Tulsa, Oklahoma, Police Department

Tulsa is Oklahoma's second largest city. It was recently named one of the United States top ten "Most Livable Cities." Formerly known for its role as a major hub of the oil industry, Tulsa is now known for its more diverse business base of aviation, technology, energy, and finance. Tulsa's Port of Catoosa is one of the nation's largest and most inland river-ports. The Tulsa Police Department (TPD) of 700 sworn officers and 140 civilians serve a population of approximately 400,000. TPD's 40 Volunteers in Police Service work on a variety of projects,

including pawn detail in the patrol unit, administrative duty in the records unit and the “VIPS Gray Unit” for cold case work with the homicide unit.

Spanish Speaking Ride Along Program

Budget cuts and department reorganization left a Tulsa sergeant in charge of both the Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) program and the Hispanic Outreach program. Recognizing the potential for crossover, the Spanish Speaking Ride Along and Interpreter Program was developed to both build trust in the Spanish-speaking community and to bring new volunteers with valued language skills into the VIPS program.



This program provides Spanish-speaking citizens with an opportunity to assist Tulsa police officers in better communicating with the Hispanic community. Bilingual citizens or legal residents who volunteer for this program ride with on-duty officers and utilize their language skills as needed. As Tulsa’s Spanish-speaking population continues to grow, it is increasingly helpful for officers to have interpretation assistance readily available. The Spanish Speaking Ride Along volunteers often live in the communities they help patrol. Their familiarity with the community and residents often helps diffuse

tension and prevent misunderstandings.

All TPD officers are provided with cultural awareness and basic “survival” Spanish trainings. Officers are offered salary bonuses to continue their Spanish language studies. The Spanish Speaking Ride Along volunteer program gives officers the opportunity to practice language skills with a native speaker, improving their pronunciation, vocabulary, and conversation skills.

Recruitment and Training

As part of their ongoing outreach efforts in the Hispanic community, TPD gives presentations to Spanish-speaking groups in the city to build relationships and educate them about crime prevention. These presentations also serve as the best recruitment tools for the Spanish Speaking Ride Along program.

Volunteers apply to the program by filling out the standard VIPS application, a notarized Ride Along Hold Harmless Agreement, and a brief resumé of their qualifications. Given the responsibility of interpretation for law enforcement, Spanish Speaking Ride Along volunteers are given a more in-depth background check and an additional personal or professional reference check beyond the three required of other VIPS. Volunteers are tested in both their English and Spanish speaking skills. They are thoroughly trained on their role as an interpreter and the importance of word-for-word translation. Much of the training and language testing is done through role play with officers to prepare volunteers for scenarios they might encounter while on a ride along.

Once they have completed training, Spanish Speaking Ride Along volunteers are given unlimited ride along privileges, whereas the general public is allowed only one ride along per

year. Volunteers participate at their own pace, scheduling their own ride alongs with officers. The goal is for volunteers and officers to build relationships and eventually work up to regular shifts together. Volunteers also have the option of being on-call to interpret by phone if an officer needs assistance.

Looking Forward

This partnership has proven mutually beneficial, as the officers have gained a deeper understanding of other cultures and the Spanish speaking volunteers have gained a better understanding of law enforcement. The Tulsa Police Department would like to see this program expand to serve all parts of the city during all shifts.

Las Vegas, Nevada, Metropolitan Police Department

Las Vegas, Nevada is well known for its exciting tourism opportunities, casinos, entertaining shows, and access to the Hoover Dam and the Grand Canyon. The city is home to 2.2 million residents and sees approximately 40 million visitors each year. The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department consists of 3,526 sworn officers and 1,634 civilians, with the support of the Metro Volunteer Program (MVP). LVMPD's 450 volunteers participate in everything from visitor information assistance at the airport to vehicle identification number etching to assisting in the investigative services division.

Hispanic Citizens Academy

As one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, Las Vegas experienced a dramatic growth

in jobs opportunities over the past two decades, particularly in the construction and tourism industries. With these new jobs, came a shift in the city's demographics. 2008 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey data estimates the Las Vegas metropolitan area's Hispanic population at 29.2 percent of the total population. This population growth brought with it an increased need for the LVMPD to provide services to a culturally diverse community.

In 2007, LVMPD introduced the Hispanic Citizen Academy to both educate the Hispanic community about the role of the police in the United States and to empower Hispanic residents to take an active role in the community and in the prevention of crime. The course is offered twice a year and averages forty participants per session.

The LVMPD makes an effort to be open and inviting and to reduce fear. Traditionally, the citizen education course is referred to as the "Citizens Police Academy," but for the Hispanic sessions, the word "Police" is dropped to avoid preconceived associations. The sessions are held in community centers or schools rather than at the police department to allow participants to feel more at ease. LVMPD partners with trusted information sources, such as the Spanish television station and Hispanic supermarkets, to help publicize the program.

The Hispanic Citizen Academy is open to all who wish to attend. The department does no residency or citizenship checks for the course. The class meets three hours per week for ten weeks. The sessions are all taught in Spanish, and many are taught by bi-lingual LVMPD

officers. Topics include: Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking, Drug Issues, Gangs, Missing Children, Theft, Fraud, Traffic Regulations, Immigration, and Basic English.

While the courses are in session, MVP volunteers are present to provide child care. The free childcare services offer many parents the option to participate who may not otherwise be able to attend. The childcare program also gives children the opportunity to learn important safety lessons while their parents are in class. Each week, Metro Volunteers “Mr. and Mrs. Safe-T” teach safety lessons through magic tricks, covering topics such as bike and car safety, drugs, alcohol, stranger danger, bullying, and fire safety. The children get to take home the magic tricks and safety activity books to share with their families. After the safety lessons, volunteers pass out snacks, help children with their homework, and lead sports activities.



Empowering New Community Leaders

Hispanic Citizens Academy (HCA) participants are encouraged to continue their involvement with the police department as volunteers with the Metro Volunteer Program. Those who do

choose to join the volunteer program are required to be permanent legal residents and complete the application process and background check like all other volunteers. One very active HCA graduate now volunteers for the Handicapped Parking Enforcement Program and recently received a special commendation for his work with VIVA (Visitors Information Visitors Assistance). He also attends each session of HCA to help recruit new volunteers. Two of his new recruits are currently going through the application process.

Through its active community partnerships of law enforcement, Spanish-speaking community leaders, and volunteers, the Hispanic Citizens Academy has helped develop more trusting relationships and educated hundreds of Hispanic residents.

Westbrook, Maine, Police Department

Located in the heart of Southern Maine, Westbrook borders Portland, the state’s largest city, and is just four miles from the Maine seacoast. With 38 sworn officers serving a population of 25,000, the Westbrook Police Department (WPD) prides itself on “dealing with big city problems with creative small town flair.” Westbrook Volunteers in Police Service support the department through college internships, Citizen Police Academy, and TRIAD, a group that helps prevent criminal victimization of older residents.

Westbrook Human Relations Committee

With a growing African and Middle Eastern refugee population, the Westbrook Police Department recognized the potential

challenges of language barriers and cultural misunderstandings. With the goal of preventing and avoiding conflict, WPD created the Human Relations Committee to embrace the city's growing diverse population. While not a traditional VIPs program, the Human Relations Committee engages community volunteers, business partners, clergy, and government agencies in innovative ways to educate officers about cultural issues and to build trust in the refugee community.

The mission of the Westbrook Human Relations Committee is to promote civil rights, personal dignity, and positive relationships between all residents and visitors. Committee members meet monthly to discuss current community issues with law enforcement and work together to find creative solutions. With more than 50 volunteer members, the committee reflects the diversity of the community at large. Members represent the countries of Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Congo, Ukraine, Russia, Mexico, and the Philippines.

A cornerstone of this program is cultural education for sworn personnel. Volunteer guest speakers, representing some of the largest immigrant and refugee populations speak to the officers about their customs, culture, and history of interaction with law enforcement and security services in their native countries.

The Human Relations Committee also works to find ways for the immigrant community to interact with the police. Members of the refugee and immigrant community are invited to participate in mock community meetings with WPD promotional candidates during a day long promotion assessment center. In addition to giving the candidates more exposure to

communicating with immigrant residents, it also gives immigrants a chance to ask officers difficult questions about the issues of concern to their community. The Committee also sponsored Iraqi and Sudanese immigrants to attend the regional Citizens Police Academy.



Cultural Liaisons On-Call

In a more operational function, volunteers are recruited to act as cultural liaisons. These volunteers are on-call to support officers with language and cultural interpretation. Volunteers are vetted and trained. The vetting process includes an application and driver's license and criminal background check. WPD also checks with the members of cultural organizations to ensure the volunteers are well respected members of their communities.

Cultural liaison volunteers translated police department brochures into multiple languages. These brochures outline the services available to residents and explain the philosophy of the police department. Officers carry these brochures and interpreter lists while on patrol, so that the services can be accessed during a traffic stop or at the scene of a call. Trained volunteers have reported to help with a range of public safety and human service issues, including a domestic violence dispute, a youth shoplifting offence, and helping an Iraqi family access the immunizations needed to apply for residency.

Looking Ahead

Given the success of the Human Relations Committee, WPD plans to expand the cultural education opportunities for its sworn officers. WPD and the Human Relations Committee are currently seeking funding to set up foreign exchange opportunities in which Westbrook officers would be sent to live and work for two weeks in a foreign police department of one of the home countries of the larger immigrant groups in Westbrook. The learning experience will continue as the department then invites the foreign law enforcement hosts to return to Westbrook for a similar period of time.

Eugene, Oregon, Police Department

Noted for its natural beauty and recreational opportunities, Eugene, Oregon prides itself on its motto "A Great City for the Arts and Outdoors." Eugene is home to the University of Oregon and an active manufacturing industry of wood products and recreational vehicles. The Eugene Police Department (EPD) serves a population of approximately 154,000 with a staff of more than 300 law enforcement employees consisting of 184 sworn officers and 124 civilians. The EPD Volunteers in Policing program was created in 1999 and has 100 volunteers working in 40 different assignments, including Seniors on Patrol, graffiti abatement, cold case investigation, bicycle registration, and vehicle maintenance.

Hand in Hand in the Community

The Eugene Police Department (EPD) had long been working informally to build relationships in the Hispanic community, but in 2003, as the



Hispanic population continued to rise, they decided it was time to put a more formal program in place. EDP staff in the neighborhood police station began meeting with the Spanish-speaking community in churches, community centers, and other places where residents felt free to speak. The goal was to educate the Spanish-speaking community about the role of police in the city, as well as to gain a better understanding of the needs of the Hispanic community.

From these initial meetings, EPD launched Mano a Mano en la Comunidad (Hand in Hand in the Community) in 2007. Both employees and volunteers participate in the program. Mano a Mano sponsors a variety of events presented in Spanish for the Hispanic community – though all community members are welcome to attend. Bi-lingual officers give presentations on police procedure and policy, such as what to do during a stop, police roles at the city, county, state, and federal level, youth issues in schools, and the role of DMV and how these may or may not connect to police and immigration issues.

Many Mano a Mano events are focused on parent education. Topics have included tips on teaching children about strangers, suggestions to keep children safe to and from school, and signs and symptoms of drug use in youth. Spanish-speaking parents are encouraged to bring their children to the events. EPD volunteers are present to keep the children occupied with police related activities. The children are given crayons and police coloring books.

Mano a Mano also sponsors large scale community events such as a festival with the San Diego Padres and the Eugene Emeralds (Ems), a local minor league baseball team with many Spanish-speaking players. Community members had the chance to get player autographs and collect free promotional items while also getting more familiar with the Eugene Police Department.

For large events like this, EPD's volunteers play important event support roles. McGruff the Crime Dog® is often present at the events, with a costumed volunteer playing the part. Volunteers also staff the EDP outreach table, handing out crime prevention literature and answering questions. Bilingual volunteers assist with interpretation.

Mano a Mano events give Hispanics in the community the opportunity to see police and police volunteers as regular people who live in this community, have families, and are raising their kids. The Mano a Mano Coordinator says, "Once you put a name and a face on a stranger, they are no longer strangers, and that goes both ways."

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VIPS Products and Resources:

VIPS Program Directory

Law enforcement agencies can register their volunteer programs and search for others with the online VIPS program directory. Citizens also can locate volunteer opportunities with law enforcement agencies in their communities. The directory allows users to search by zip code, state, key word, and type of program.

VIPS Resource Library

Browse and download sample documents from law enforcement volunteer programs, such as multicultural program descriptions, position descriptions, and policy and procedures for volunteer programs.

IACP Products and Resources:

Police Chiefs Guide to Immigration Issues

This resource provides an overview of issues surrounding immigration, both legal and illegal, provides background information on the current resources available to law enforcement, and examines the concerns and obstacles that currently surround the debate over immigration enforcement by the state, tribal and local law enforcement community.

The Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program works to enhance the capacity of state and local law enforcement to utilize volunteers. VIPS serves as a gateway to resources and information for and about law enforcement volunteer programs. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) manages the VIPS Program in partnership with and on behalf of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.



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