Ensuring Communication: Providing Translation and Interpretation Services

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Over the past decade, North Carolina has attracted a large number of immigrants.[1] The state's cities and towns now must serve many people with limited English proficiency, especially Latinos. At the same time, municipalities face tighter budgets. How can they meet residents' needs while not stretching limited resources too far?

This article discusses five strategies for North Carolina cities to use in providing translation and interpretation services, and outlines the strengths and the weaknesses of each. In addition, it considers appropriate uses of the different strategies. Then it looks at options for translation and interpretation services in two municipal services, solid waste and water, documenting what is happening in cities across the state as evidenced by a survey conducted in fall 2001. Municipal governments need to know their options in providing translation and interpretation services. Among other things, recent federal mandates specify that

organizations spending federal grant money provide services in any language a client needs.[2]

Methodology

I employed two methodologies to complete this research: an extensive literature review and a survey of the thirty-three North Carolina cities with populations of more than 20,000. For the survey I made initial contact via e-mail, obtaining a 36 percent return rate. Responses came from Asheville, Charlotte, Concord, Fayetteville, Greensboro, Havelock, Kannapolis, Kinston, Monroe, Rocky Mount, Salisbury, and Winston-Salem. The responding cities represented a wide range of ethnic groups, populations, and geographical areas. In each responding city, I contacted the department head responsible for solid waste or water and asked him or her to refer me to the employee who could best answer questions for the department about translation and interpretation services.

OWASA (the Orange Water and Sewer Authority) keeps its Latino customers informed about the water supply through bulletins in Spanish.

Solid waste and water were the focus of the survey because they are two of the main services provided by a majority of cities in North Carolina. Further, residents need access to them soon after moving to a city. Cities with populations of more than 20,000 constituted the sample for two reasons. First, although there is not a direct correlation between tax base and population, in general, the larger the population, the larger the possibility of a tax base that might support translation and interpretation services. Second, larger populations generally ensure a Latino presence. Although the survey was meant

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to capture different percentages of Latinos living in the state, having Latinos present in the cities surveyed also was important (for data on the Latino populations in the responding cities, see Table 1).

Options for Translation and Interpretation Services

"Translation" refers to written communication, "interpretation" to oral communication. The distinction is important for several reasons. Providing translation is easier than providing interpretation because a third party can do translations in its own time frame. Translations also last longer, in the sense that they can be duplicated and used again. Interpretation is usually specific to a case and a time and cannot be reused. However, interpretation gives the person who does not speak English greater flexibility because two-way conversations can occur.

Five strategies for providing translation and interpretation services were researched: using electronic translation, using the AT&T Language Line, contracting for services, building institutional capability, and hiring people with fluency in a second language.[3] To determine the strengths and the weaknesses of each strategy, as well as its appropriateness for a given organization, I considered it in light of the following criteria:[4]

- Does it provide translation services?
- Does it provide interpretation services?
- Does it produce accurate services?
- Does it maximize city resources?
- Does it increase institutional capability to deal with language barriers?
- Does it reduce cultural barriers between city and Latino residents?

This section describes the five strategies and provides some insight into the usefulness and the effectiveness of each one according to the six criteria just given (see Table 2 for a summary).

Using Electronic Translation

The cheapest and simplest option for translation—provided that a city has Internet access—is translation via an Internet website.[5] Such a website has a cut-and-paste component from Microsoft Office Documents that allows easy maneuvering from site to document and offers instant translation services.

The problem with this type of service is that it translates by word, rather than by sentence. Moreover, the sites do not translate in context. Therefore the translations are inadequate and piecemeal.[6] Thus, although this is the least expensive approach, the result does not meet the high quality of customer service required by local governments. In reality these services provide little information to the non-English-speaking public.[7] None of the departments surveyed used this service.

Using the AT&T Language Line

Many emergency management facilities use the language line.[8] Provided by AT&T, it allows an operator to add a third-party interpreter to a telephone conversation, enabling a non-English-speaking person and a city employee to understand each other. The service is convenient, is available all hours of the day, and covers a multitude of languages.

Unfortunately the service can be expensive.[9] Also, it does not build capability in the cities. They must continue the system, and at the end of their contracts, they are no more able to deal with Latinos or other people who do not speak English than they were before.

A productive use of this strategy is as an interim measure, while implementing other systems. This type of system works best when conversations are being conducted by telephone rather than in person.

None of the Solid Waste or Water departments surveyed indicated that they used the AT&T Language Line.

Contracting for Services

Contracting with an external organization, usually for a fee, provides high-quality translation but at some cost. The average translator charges $25–$35 per page plus a setup fee, and higher fees for rush work.

Asheville contracts for translation services in its solid waste operations,

Table 1. **Demographic Information on Cities Surveyed**

City	Total Population	Latino Population	Percentage Latino
Asheville	68,889	2,590	3.76
Charlotte	540,826	39,805	7.36
Concord	55,977	4,366	7.80
Fayetteville	121,015	6,862	5.67
Greensboro	223,891	9,739	4.35
Havelock	22,442	2,022	9.01
Kannapolis	36,910	2,336	6.33
Kinston	23,688	270	1.14
Monroe	26,228	5,610	21.39
Rocky Mount	55,893	1,034	1.85
Salisbury	26,462	1,138	4.30
Winston-Salem	185,776	16,051	8.64

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, North Carolina, available at http://factfinder.census.gov/bf/_lang=en_vt_name=DEC_2000_PL_U_GCTPL_ST7_geo_id=04000US37.html.

Table 2. Pros and Cons of Strategies for Providing Translation and Interpretation Services

	Using Electronic Translation	Using AT&T Language Line	Contracting for Services	Building Institutional Capability	Hiring People with Fluency
Does strategy provide translation services?	Yes.	No.	Yes.	Yes, but probably not more than capability to translate very basic documents.	Yes.
Does strategy provide interpretation services?	No.	Yes.	Maybe.	Yes.	Yes.
Does strategy produce accurate services?	No.	Yes.	More likely.	Depends on amount of training.	More likely.
Does strategy maximize city resources?	No. It is cheap, but results are inaccurate.	Depends on use.	In general, no, though in some instances it would be most cost-effective option.	Depends on use.	Usually.
Does strategy increase institutional capability to deal with language barriers?	No.	No.	No.	Yes.	Yes.
Does strategy reduce cultural barriers between city and Latino residents?	No. It may exacerbate them because of inaccurate translation.	Minimally.	Minimally.	Yes, to some extent. City employees may be more exposed to Latino culture as they learn language.	Yes. It is more likely to involve Latino community members in government.

specifically in the recycling department. The department sent a solid waste directory (containing such information as what can be recycled, what is considered a "large item," and where and how to dispose of chemicals) and two brochures on recycling to a private company in Indianapolis for translation after it received about ten requests for these documents in Spanish.[10]

Contracting for interpretation services is more difficult than contracting for translation services. As mentioned earlier, interpretation is case-specific. Therefore a city has to contract for a specified length of time, such as for a meeting or an event, or pay to have an interpreter on call whenever the services may be needed. Contracting for interpretation also may mean that the person providing the services has little or no knowledge of the subject area for which he or she is interpreting. Although the interpreter may be fluent in Spanish, there may be technical terms or ideas that will be difficult to convey without a clear grasp of the topic.

The AT&T Language Line allows an operator to add a third-party interpreter to a telephone conversation, enabling a non-English-speaking person and a city employee to understand each other.

Building Institutional Capability

A fourth strategy is to train current employees in a second language, or at least to teach them minimal comprehension of basic sentences. This strategy, which can be accomplished through a number of media, is primarily useful for interpretation services.

One way to use this strategy is to enroll employees in Spanish for Gringos, a basic Spanish class offered at many community colleges throughout the state.[11]

Another method is to send employees to immersion programs. These programs are usually month-long experiences during which an employee goes to a Spanish-speaking country, lives with a Spanish-speaking family, and takes intensive language courses. On return he or she has the equivalent of two years of conversational-level Spanish at the college level. The cost of these programs is often in the same price range as a week-long out-of-state conference.[12]

On the one hand, this strategy gives employees who already have technical or managerial expertise a chance to learn the language and to communicate directly with residents who have limited English proficiency. In this way a city can be assured that the information being

given is more accurate and credible, assuming proper translation. This strategy also increases institutional capability.

A potential problem with this strategy is that if employees do not constantly use their skills, the skills will deteriorate quickly. Also, employees may not have enough skill to translate other than the most rudimentary documents. Further, precautions have to be in place to ensure that translations and interpretations are accurate and not misleading.

Charlotte uses this strategy. A personnel policy directly links an increase in pay to proficiency in a second language.[13] To ensure proficiency, people who receive compensation for language capabilities must pass a test. If they cease serving in a position that requires bilingual abilities, the premium pay is eliminated.[14]

Hiring People with Fluency in a Second Language

The fifth option builds institutional capability by specifying language requirements in job descriptions, or by building language requirements into hiring situations in some other way.[15] In this manner a city can use skills already in existence rather than trying to create them in its current workforce. Also, this option makes it more likely that members of the Latino community will become a part of city government, thus providing an access point for all Latinos in the area. Further, a newly hired bilingual person is likely to be able to provide both translation and interpretation services. There still would need to be adequate safeguards to ensure accuracy in content and concept.

A drawback to this strategy is that if only one or two people are brought into the organization with these skills, they may be overwhelmed with requests from other departments.

Salisbury has hired a person in its human resources department to provide translation and interpretation services. She has translated community service announcements and public awareness campaigns for the Solid Waste Department and is on call during normal business hours for residents with limited English proficiency who need to set up their solid waste services. Further, she provides interpretation services at town meetings.[16]

Current Status of Services

Of the twelve cities responding to the survey, three provided no translation or interpretation services for their Solid Waste and Water departments. Six provided interpreters internally, some through their Solid Waste and Water departments, others through other departments. The interpreters mostly helped new residents access city services, were available at town meetings for interpretation services, and were available at the help desk or to answer incoming calls regarding solid waste or water service. Six of the responding cities also indicated that they used written translation provided by staff, either within the Solid Waste or Water Department or in another department. They used these staff in public awareness campaigns (to translate items like fliers distributed to residents) and for community service announcements. One city indicated that it used translation services for bill payment.

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Recommendations

Cities can take a number of steps to begin to address the needs of the residents in their communities with limited English proficiency.

1. Begin with an internal assessment.

Many cities across the nation that have implemented systematic policy in this area have begun with interdepartmental work groups on the issue.[17] These groups perform an internal assessment of where their city stands. Creating such groups allows for systemwide analysis and change, instead of a piecemeal approach.

The assessment should lead to a written outline of what is currently being done and what needs to be done throughout the city. The outline should report current spending levels for translation and interpretation services.

2. Involve community members.

After a city has done a thorough assessment and understands what its goals for translation and interpretation services are, it should involve the local community, especially the Latino community, in planning. Some cities, like Fremont, California, and Arlington, Virginia, have used a volunteer language bank, through which community members who speak a variety of languages are available to provide interpretation services when needed. Other cities, like Sterling Heights, Michigan, have created advisory councils to help the city implement plans and address unmet needs.[18]

3. Match the strategy to institutional capability.

No one strategy will work for every situation. City managers and administrators should match a strategy to the needs, as well as the strengths, of their community.

Consideration of a couple of variables may help decision makers choose the appropriate strategy:

- *Funds available:* The amount of money available is key to determining what type of service to use. Although city staff may be creative in obtaining funds (using resources like non-profits, for example), they first must ascertain the level of funding they will need to provide the service effectively. If a city has adequate funds available, hiring people with fluency in a second language may be a wise choice. If funds are extremely limited, contracting for the most essential services may be more appropriate.

- *Composition of staff and community:* The demographics of both the community and city staff are important

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to consider in determining which strategy to implement. If a city has employees who are fluent or near-fluent in a second language, investment of money and resources in them may be the wisest choice. The best type of employee to invest resources in is one who interacts in a second language on a daily basis.

4. Ensure the quality of translation.

A mechanism must be in place to ensure the quality of translation. Without one, the most well-intentioned city may not provide effective service. One city in North Carolina went to considerable lengths and expense to translate a twenty-page color booklet outlining city services and many attractive features in the area. Subsequently an editor of a Spanish newspaper informed city staff that the booklet contained sixty-one errors.

The city had relied on internal translators, who had unverified Spanish-speaking and -writing skills. Especially for translation services, which produce documents for the long term, verifying the accuracy and the legitimacy of translators is important. When planning to rely on internal employees, cities first should give them a standardized test like the one used by Charlotte. When using external firms, cities should check the credentials of the firms to ensure that personnel demonstrate accuracy in meaning and context.

Conclusion

With planning and foresight, North Carolina's cities can address the complex challenges and opportunities that changing demographics present. By addressing translation and interpretation services across departments, cities can use their resources better and set a comprehensive strategy.

Notes

1. According to the Census, in 1990 the Latino population was 76,726, or 1.2 percent of the total population. By 2000 it had grown to 378,963, or 4.7 percent of the population—a fourfold increase. See http://factfinder. census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsTable?_lang=en &_vt_name=DEC_1990_STF1_DP1&_geo_ id=04000US37 for 1990 Census data; http://factfinder.census.gov/bf/_lang=en_vt_ name=DEC_2000_PL_U_GCTPL_ST5_geo_ id=04000US37.html for 2000 Census data.

2. Executive Order 13166, dated August 11, 2000, stated that, on the basis of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, "the Department of Justice has today issued a general guidance document, which sets forth the compliance standards that recipients must follow to ensure that the programs and activities they normally provide in English are accessible to LEP [limited-English-proficiency] persons."

3. CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS, INTERDEPARTMENTAL NEW ARRIVALS WORK GROUP, WELCOMING NEW ARRIVALS TO MINNEAPOLIS: ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS 2–3 (Minneapolis: Aug. 2000).

4. These criteria were derived from information in the following sources: CITY OF WINSTON-SALEM'S HISPANIC TASK FORCE REPORT (Dec. 2001); Proposal for the City of Greensboro to Improve Multi-Cultural Relations with the Hispanic Community during Human Relations Month (Mar. 2001); CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS, WELCOMING NEW ARRIVALS; and Policy Guidelines on the Prohibition against National Origin Discrimination as It Affects Persons with Limited English Proficiency, 67 Fed. Reg. 4968 (Feb. 1, 2002).

5. Examples include www.freetranslation. com, www.syntax.com, and bablefish. altavista.com.

6. Using Altavista, I typed "You need to bring appropriate identification in order to sign up for service." The translation was "Usted tiene que traer la identificación apropiada para firmar para arriba para el servicio." Translated back into English by Altavista, the sentence read, "You must bring identificaciÃ_n [sic] appropriate to sign for above for the service."

7. Proposal for the City of Greensboro to Improve Multicultural Relations, at 14.

8. For more information, visit www. languageline.com.

9. The rates are categorized by both language and time of call. During the day (from 8 A.M. to 8 P.M.), the range is from $2.20 per minute for Spanish translation to $2.60 per minute for less-used languages. For nights and weekends, though, the prices are higher, those for Spanish rising to $2.50 per minute and those for certain other languages becoming as expensive as $4.50 per minute. There also is a $50 monthly fee, which is applied against usage.

10. Telephone Interview with Audren Stevens, Recycling Coordinator, City of Asheville (Dec. 10, 2001).

11. For a nominal fee (usually about $60 per student), a Spanish instructor teaches basic language and cultural norms, hands out note cards or some other quick reference guide that the employee can use when responding to residents with limited English proficiency, and helps employees practice basic language skills. These can be specific to an area of service, like fire and rescue, or general.

12. The cost can be as low as $2,500, airfare and meals included.

13. The relevant policy reads, "Employees in positions requiring proficiency in a second language including Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai and American Sign Language are eligible for a 5% increase in base pay not to exceed the maximum rate of pay identified for the job." Available at www.co.mecklenburg.nc.us/cohr/policy/ section3.htm (visited Feb. 1, 2002).

14. The relevant policy reads,

> To function in this capacity employees will be required to pass a proficiency test arranged by the department through the University of North Carolina at Charlotte or an appropriate alternate site. The acceptable proficiency level for the County is advanced or superior as defined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). All employees, including native speakers, are required to be tested. The County pays for testing . . . Premium pay increases are effective the pay period following the results of the proficiency test and are not retroactive . . . Premium pay increases will be removed from an employee's salary if they cease to use this skill or move to a position that does not require bilingual skills.

Available at www.co.mecklenburg.nc.us/cohr/ policy/section3.htm (visited Feb. 1, 2002).

15. CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS, WELCOMING NEW ARRIVALS, at 11.

16. Telephone Interview with Lynn Hillard, Sanitation Manager, City of Salisbury (Dec. 11, 2001).

17. See CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS, WELCOMING NEW ARRIVALS, and CITY OF WINSTON-SALEM'S HISPANIC TASK FORCE REPORT.

18. See CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS, WELCOMING NEW ARRIVALS.