



The Prince William County, Virginia Department of Fire and Rescue has implemented a Spanish Immersion Project (SIP) pilot program to be more responsive to our Spanish monolingual customers.

The firefighters assigned to Fire Station 8 initiated and developed this program because their community is experiencing a rapid increase of Spanish speaking residents.

Background

Between 1990 and 2000 the Hispanic population of Prince William County tripled. In 2002, Hispanics represented the fastest growing segment of our community. The 2002 U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey identified 12 percent of Prince William County's residents who speak primarily Spanish at home – which translates to approximately 40,000 residents over the age of five.

With the data received from the most recent census, the Department of Fire and Rescue is just one agency that is addressing the issue of forming a professional staff reflective of its community demographics. Current staffing levels indicate that only two percent of the Department of Fire and Rescue staff is Hispanic. An informal survey of staffing at each station revealed that during the 12-hour career shift there are roughly five Spanish-speaking firefighters/ALS providers on duty. Existing strategies for dealing with Spanish monolingual customers when there is no Spanish speaking personnel on the scene include: using bystanders or family (including children), body language and gestures, language line, police, and “cheat sheets.”

During research on how to deal with the challenge of offering personalized service to monolingual Spanish customers, members of Prince William County Fire Station 8 learned of a program in Phoenix, Arizona that employed a Spanish Immersion fire station. Team members visited with coordinators of the program in the Phoenix fire department, and they were generously given information that allowed them to begin putting together a course catering to the needs of the Latino citizens and visitors of Prince William County.

The New Dimension

The Spanish Immersion Project (SIP) Team has proposed a more strategic, more effective, and more permanent approach to meeting the needs of Spanish monolingual customers. Using a three-dimensional approach, the SIP Team is piloting a program at Fire Station 8 that is teaching the following:

- Job related, functional Spanish to firefighters/ALS providers
- Community service by creating practical experiences
- Increasing Latino recruitment and retention

This outreach will ultimately foster a more positive image of the Fire and Rescue Department within the Hispanic community and increase Latino recruitment and retention to more closely mirror the 12 percent Hispanic population of the community. Removing the language barriers and breaking down the walls that separate the Department and the Latino community will provide a new dimension of customer service. By learning the language, the Department is showing its willingness to reach out to our monolingual customers in need. Increasing the recruitment of Hispanics will build a natural alliance, as the growing numbers of Hispanic Fire and Rescue team members are bridging the gaps between the Department and their home communities.

The language-training dimension of the program is comprised of:

1. 80 hours of formal instruction divided into six modules over a six month period utilizing:
 - a. Textbooks
 - b. Audio course
 - c. Instructor-led classes
 - d. Interactive website
2. Multiple hours of in-station practice and scenarios
 - a. Fire and Rescue
 - b. EMS
 - c. Auto accidents
 - d. MCIs
3. Various community service activities
 - a. Local walk-throughs
 - b. Participation in Hispanic Festival
 - c. Involvement with schools – English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program (students, faculty and parents)
 - d. Car seat installations

Examples and Successes to Date

- Participated in Parents as Educational Partners (PEP) class at Osbourn Park Senior High School. This encounter allowed members of the SIP Team to interact with Latino parents that have children in the ESOL program within the Prince William County Public School System. Included in this was a question/answer session to educate the adults on the fire and rescue service. Members then experienced Latino foods and customs in a relaxed atmosphere.
- Participated in the Newcomers Program with Prince William County Public Schools. This program is the summer school for ESOL students. During the program, members of the SIP Team met on three occasions with the class of 60 students. These meetings consisted of informational sessions on the fire and rescue service, fire safety, and EMS lectures on first aid, CPR, and burn injuries as well as a field trip to Fire Station 8 that showcased the facility and apparatus. During the field trip to the fire station, live demonstrations were completed on both fire suppression and EMS scenarios. That day concluded with a cookout in which the SIP team assigned to Fire Station 8 prepared lunch for approximately 80 attendees.
- Attended the Newcomers graduation where the SIP Team was invited as honored guests. During the ceremony, all students were presented with a certificate of successful completion from the Prince William County Public Schools. After receiving their certificates, the students were greeted and congratulated by members of the SIP Team.
- Received cultural insight from guest speakers throughout the SIP. Speakers included Doctor Raul Rodriguez, Operational Medical Director for Prince William County Department of Fire and Rescue and Detective Orlando Santiago of the Alexandria Police Department. These speakers offered insight on assisting Latinos in many different situations. Focus was on EMS incidents where cultural knowledge is helpful in assisting patients and families in a pre-hospital environment where there is a communication barrier.
- Meetings with Latino businesses within the community to increase fire safety awareness and education, as well as to establish a rapport with the merchants. During these encounters, the SIP Team has become more accustomed to the Latino traditions.
- Offered smoke detector installations by going door-to-door in neighborhoods of high Latino population and offering to check smoke detectors. Replaced smoke detectors as necessary and educated occupants on smoke detector use, fire safety in the home, and the importance of a fire escape plan.

- Assisted medical staff at sites for the Mobile Primary Health Care Van. This program targets low income families who cannot afford health care by offering routine health exams and screenings at prescheduled locations within the community. The SIP Team participated in this program by assisting with the translation of medical screening sheets for Spanish monolingual customers. An additional benefit for the SIP Team was receiving practical experience in using the language in a less stressful, non-emergency setting.
- Worked with the Department of Fire and Rescue personnel and Public Education Divisions to establish and translate career information and public safety messages for Latino citizens. The career information is used at job fairs and in various employment advertisements.
- Received fire and rescue trading cards to be given to children while out in the community. These cards have personnel information and fire safety messages in both English and Spanish on them.

Planned Community Outreach Events

- Attend and assist with the Hispanic Festival in the City of Manassas, Virginia on September 25, 2004.
- Attend and assist with the Hispanic Health Fair in the City of Manassas, Virginia on September 26, 2004.
- ESOL interaction for the upcoming school year at Osbourn Park Senior High School. This will include using students for job related scenarios to practice language skills and educate students on fire and rescue practices. This is also intended as a tool for future recruitment of Latinos.

Conclusion

The Spanish Immersion Program pilot has been very well received by the community since its inception. It has been deemed a success by the Prince William County administration and will be implemented County-wide after completion of the pilot program at Fire Station 8. The Prince William County Department of Fire and Rescue has developed and promoted a solution in achieving a diverse work force and a successful community outreach program. This is a great example of a workforce that is responsive and empathetic to the needs of their changing environment.