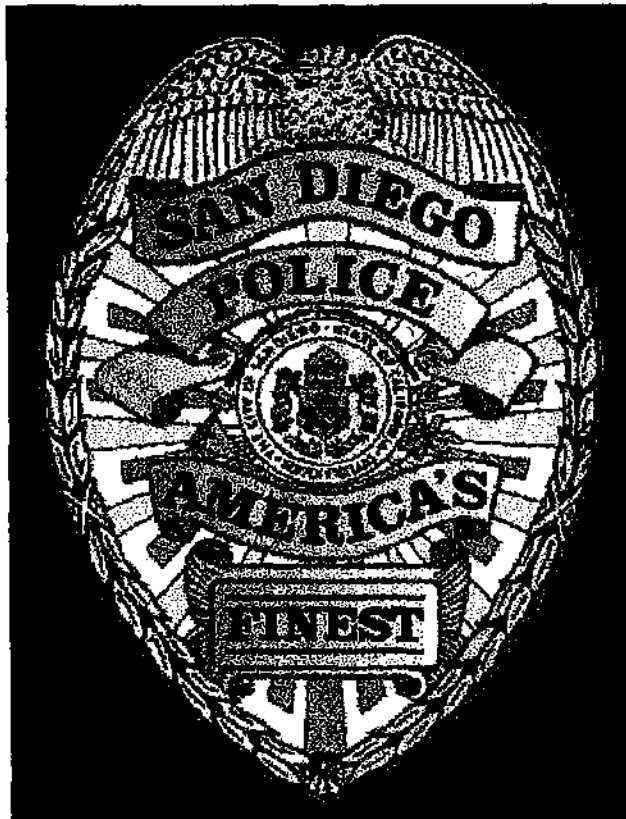


## The San Diego Police Department



### Volunteer Police Interpreters Program

Nomination for the Herman Goldstein Excellence in Problem Oriented  
Policing Award

San Diego Volunteer Police Interpreters Program

**SAN DIEGO REGIONAL PUBLIC  
SAFETY TRAINING INSTITUTE**

**MEMORANDUM**

**FILE NO.:** 8100  
**DATE:** May 21, 1998  
**TO:** Gary Jaus, Sergeant  
**FROM:** Nathalio M. Caplan, Sergeant  
**SUBJECT:** Nomination of the Volunteer Police Interpreters Program

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**SUMMARY**

**Scanning:**

The San Diego Police Department provides police services to one of the most culturally diverse communities in the nation. Census figures show a high number of languages spoken by large numbers of the population.

There are many times when interpreters are unavailable to handle situations. These range from minor incidents to major investigations.

**Analysis:**

Statistical information showed that in 1990, San Diego had more than 140,000 *residents* that labeled themselves as "linguistically isolated." These figures apply to *legal residents*. The number of illegal immigrants in the City of San Diego has only been estimated but it is considered to be in the tens of thousands.

These new groups of immigrants tend to be the most isolated communities in the city. They are isolated by their economic or social status, and they are also separated from mainstream society by their inability to communicate.

Solutions to this problem have been temporary and only addressed smaller sectors of the population without an all-encompassing approach.

**Response:**

The response was planned around an existing policing philosophy that makes extensive use of volunteers in various levels of service. The project goal was to develop a pool of volunteers who

are multilingual and who would provide the needed languages on a minimal cost basis (training and administrative costs only). These volunteers would be available to Department employees at all levels of assignment.

A team of employees used a variety of public, private, and community resources to develop a program that addressed all the issues needed to insure the program would be valuable. This was ultimately named the Volunteer Police Interpreters Program.

Assessment:

This very effective program has provided thousands of hours of volunteer service to the Department. Volunteer Interpreters have assisted in a variety of calls including homicides, robbery series, serious injuries, domestic violence and others. The program is currently staffed by more than sixty volunteers who offer interpreting service in more than twenty-two languages. The program has expanded to provide services to other City of San Diego entities within the Criminal Justice system and in other city services.



Nathalio M. Caplan, Sergeant  
Human Relations Core Instructor

Scanning:

The City of San Diego has one of the largest levels of immigration in the nation.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this immigrant population, San Diego has a large Spanish speaking resident base.

With such a diverse community to serve, the ability to communicate in a variety of languages has become a significant obstacle to providing quality police services. On many occasions officers encounter situations in which a language skill is necessary but usually unavailable. The prevailing practice for these situations is to request an officer or Community Services Officer (CSO) that may be able to assist. When one of these resources is unavailable (and this happens frequently), the investigating officer seeks out a neighbor or family member to assist. This use of untried, unknown interpreters introduces a variety of problems into the investigation. Some of these problems range from lack of ability in the interpreting skill, bias for or against the involved parties, and on occasion outright deception.

The lack of language services affects the department and the community at all levels. Patrol officers are handicapped in their ability to do preliminary investigations, to handle calls for service, and to do effective problem solving. Investigators are hampered in interviewing victims, witnesses, and suspects. Clerical and support personnel can not provide information or services to the public. Management staff is restricted in their ability to communicate and interact with a significant portion of the population.

This problem was identified through a variety of information sources. The most significant was the experience of patrol officers and supervisors who dealt with this problem on a frequent basis and under critical circumstances such as serious injury crimes and felony investigations. Based on my experience as a City of San Diego certified translator and as a sergeant with more than ten years experience in patrol supervision, and from many discussions with other department employees, I developed a clearer understanding of the nature and scope of the problem. While participating in the Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training (POST) Master Instructor Development Program (MIDP) I received training in advanced instructional development. This process provided the framework to deal with the problem.

The problem had been discussed at a variety of levels for several years. Some solutions had been devised but although they served the purpose at the time, more recent information showed the demographic changes and different immigration picture of the last decade had outpaced them.

This problem was selected because it offered several challenges and significant benefits if it was solved in a comprehensive fashion. The challenges from this problem were significant:

- A lack of financial resources to address the problem by traditional methods.
- A lack of similar situations (other municipalities have significant language issues but few as large as San Diego).

- The fact that no current solution was effectively dealing with the entire problem.
- An opportunity to apply significant creativity because there were few similar models.
- The problem has a citywide effect. Some areas are affected more significantly than others but none escapes the reality that we have become one of the most diverse cities in the nation.

As a patrol supervisor and a participant in the MI DP, the problem of language services for the City of San Diego offered a unique opportunity to deal with a host of issues and challenges that would provide significant "return on the investment."

**Analysis:**

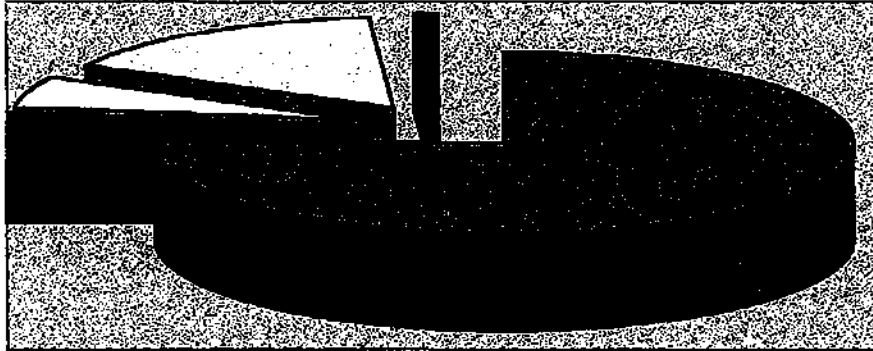
The POST Master Instructor Development Program is a training and certification program that has heavy emphasis on instructor development and in training design. From the beginning of the problem solving process, it was apparent that training would become a significant factor in any response. The research was directed toward development of a training program that would ultimately provide the resources necessary to solve the problem.

A variety of resources were used to analyze the problem. These included Census figures, Immigration and Naturalization Services figures, San Diego Police Communications Division records, The Statistical Abstract of the United States, a search of literature on the topic, and other sources of relevant data.

This information formed the basis to determine the scope of the problem. Demographic information helped develop population comparisons and to identify the languages present in the county. Internal department records were used to determine the cost of current services. Interviews with employees were conducted to obtain information on the type of services where interpreting skills were necessary.

The picture that emerged from this analysis was that historically, the police department had to contend with only one additional language: Spanish. In 1975 a large influx of refugees and immigrants from South East Asia began to change the demographic picture of the county of San Diego. The San Diego Police Department responded by hiring several CSOs that spoke the languages of Indo China. A new storefront operation was opened that specialized in serving the Indo Chinese Community. This method was largely successful until the mid-1980s when a new level of immigration was reached. At this time, the picture changed drastically. Beginning with an influx of Cuban and Haitian émigrés, San Diego county experienced a large influx of people from many nations. Within ten years the language picture changed. The 1990 Census found that there were twenty-four languages spoken in significant numbers with a twenty-fifth category that includes at least twenty more languages with population counts too small to be individually categorized."

## Languages Spoken at Home (Persons 5 years and over)



■ English Only

■ Europe & Russia

□ Middle East, Asia, & Pacific slands

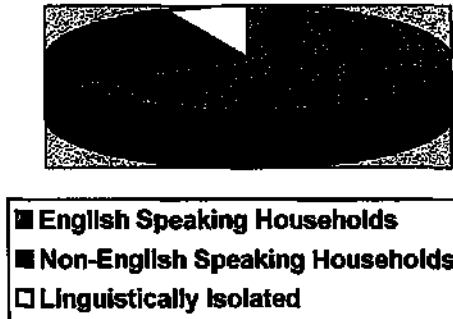
□ Spanish

■ Other & Unspecified



In the category of "Language Isolation" the Census found that in a total of 556,685 *households* surveyed where a language other than English is spoken, 142,149 (25.3%) *people* considered themselves "Linguistically Isolated."<sup>iii</sup>

### Linguistic Isolation



These Census figures tend to indicate the conditions of *legal residents*. Due to fear of deportation and a variety of other factors many illegal immigrants failed to participate in the census. For October 1996, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates there are 5,000,000 illegal immigrants in the nation with 2,000,000 of those residing in the State of California.<sup>iv</sup>

What these figures show is that the approach of hiring a few CSOs to meet the need for language services was no longer a viable option. Neither was reliance on personnel working at any given time of the day. The policy of the San Diego Police Department is to keep Spanish speaking dispatchers in Communications Division on every shift. This does not address the need for the other languages used by people who call the police for service. To meet this need the dispatchers rely on a private provider that supplies interpreters on a subscription cost basis with additional charges per minute of actual use. The

cost varies depending on the language, but it starts at \$2.95 *per minute*. This service is not available to other department personnel and it is easy to see that it could become cost prohibitive for any but the briefest of investigations/

The lack of interpreters affects all aspects of department services. Patrol officers trying to determine the need for a preliminary investigation; detectives conducting victim, witness, and suspect interviews, or follow-up investigations; clerical and records personnel trying to answer public inquiries; management officers trying to reach the community to deal with global issues; and other members of the Criminal Justice System.

The examples of the harm resulting from a lack of interpreters go from trivial to serious. In one case, an officer went to investigate a disturbance at a Somali household. Finding a language obstacle in trying to interview the mother, the officer used a family member as an interpreter. The interpreter explained that although there had been some problems earlier, the situation had been resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Several days later, word filtered back to the department that the problem at the house had been with the son. The same one the officer used as an interpreter and who had taken advantage of the opportunity to derail the investigation. In another case, an investigation into the killing of a university professor and his daughter was significantly delayed because of a lack of interpreters.

Clearly the broad nature of the problem required a global approach to a solution. That solution took the shape of the Volunteer Police Interpreters Program.

**Response:**

Possible alternatives that had been tried in the past were reviewed. They provided examples of the methods that were successful and some that were not. One of the issues that emerged was that to be highly effective, interpreters had to be either native speakers or people with extensive exposure to the language and *the culture* of the country for which they were providing language services. The number of languages spoken in the city also limited the possibility of hiring enough interpreters to fill the need.

In the category of isolation, we believed that those groups who found they were "Linguistically Isolated" would by necessity also be Culturally Isolated. This would result in a lack of participation in typical social and economic endeavors. This in turn would limit the department's ability to relate to significant sectors of the population. With the San Diego Police Department deeply committed to Neighborhood Policing, having a large sector of the population that is unable to communicate with department employees would prevent the attainment of all the goals set by the Neighborhood Policing philosophy.

A team was assembled to deal with these issues and to look into a recruitment and training program for community volunteers. The goal was to create a program that would provide the department with a variety of languages while at the same time providing closer ties to the community. The development team consisted of department employees with expertise in Radio and Telephone Communications, Patrol, Investigations, Hostage Negotiations, Legal Issues,

Report Writing, Community Relations, and S.W.A.T. Each of the team members brought their own unique perspective to the development of the program.

Using the Kemp Instructional Systems Design model,<sup>1</sup> the team developed a training program that dealt with the following Instructional Issues:

- The goal was to develop a training program that would prepare multilingual volunteers to assist Police Department personnel in any situation that required the use of an interpreter.
- The priority for the program was internal to the design team. No department mandate existed but the need had been clearly established. The team began the design process in December 1995 and set a projected completion date for September 1996.
- The constraints for the program were that any volunteer would have to go through the same background investigation as all department volunteers. Budgetary factors dictated the need for a Spartan program that made use of available resources without requiring significant additional expenditures. In addition, some of the cultural groups that were to be brought together have been traditionally hostile toward each other. The design team provided for the eventuality that disagreement might take place during the training sessions.

The training topics identified by the design team included:

- Accuracy of translation

- Staying in the role of interpreter and not assuming a role of the investigator, interviewer, etc. The volunteer's role is strictly restricted to translating the language.
- Basic report writing skills.
- The ability to provide interpreting services on the telephone as well as in person.
- Recognition of Post-Trauma Stress Syndrome and access to resources for this problem.
- Skills specific to interpreting while being audio or video taped.
- The ability to provide verbal and non-verbal cues about the translation process to the investigating officer.
- A testing component to insure the volunteers possessed the required skills to serve as effective interpreters.

The program that the team developed addressed all the concerns in an active training style. Role-play situations, small group activities and discussion were the main training delivery techniques.

Once the training program was developed, members of the Retired Senior Volunteers in Policing who were bilingual were identified and formed the first class of the Volunteer Interpreters Program. This class was held in October 1996 and a news release by the Media Relations Unit notified interested organizations about the new program. The ensuing news coverage generated a

large pool of interested volunteers. They formed a pool of prospective interpreters that kept the training staff occupied for several months.

This pool of volunteers was the ultimate target for the recruitment effort. They were all community members who were interested in serving their cultural-language community and in helping the police department to perform better. They were skilled in the needed languages and they were people with significant community involvement. Many of them belonged to social activity groups that were language or culture specific.

Once a significant level of languages was available, the program was publicized through several department channels. Chief of Police Jerry Sanders videotaped an informational message. A training bulletin was generated from the Training and Development unit. An article was published in a local law enforcement magazine.<sup>71</sup> The training staff attended supervisor's meetings and notified personnel of the availability of the new program, and Communications Division was enlisted to serve as a conduit for language requests.

Interestingly, and in opposition to the "Build a better mousetrap..." theory, utilization of the resource proved to be initially weak and sporadic. To date, the most difficult obstacle has been to get department employees to use the resource that is now available seven days a week and 24 hours per day (see comments under assessment).

The difficulties encountered during the implementation phase included the fact that a large organization like the San Diego Police Department is slow to change. In spite of offering a better way to do business (trained, unbiased, fluent

interpreters vs. unproven, unknown neighbors and family) department employees were slow to adapt to the new resource.

Another difficulty was a lack of training for police officers in the use of interpreters. There is a misconception that if a person speaks a second language they are automatically skilled as good interpreters. Unfortunately this is not the case and the quality of the service provided by the department suffers from this misguided theory.

The response was implemented as a complete team effort. It included the office of Volunteer Services who offered logistical support and coordination of the application process. Members of the program development staff went on to form the training staff. They also worked on publicizing the program by attending supervisor's meetings, line-ups, etc. The volunteers accompanied the staff to the various meetings. This served two functions. First, it allowed department personnel to find out about the program and the volunteers. Second, it allowed the volunteers a familiarization period in which they learned to be more at ease working with department employees.

Recruitment and training continued until April 30, 1998. At this point there are sixty-two volunteers who provide services in more than twenty-two languages.

**Assessment:**

Including training hours, the San Diego Police Department Volunteer Interpreters Program has provided more than 3,000 hours of volunteer time. Interpreting services have been provided in a variety of circumstances. Some

cases include the murder of a University Professor and his daughter. The Japanese interpreter who assisted was a member of the program. He also assisted the Crisis Intervention Team by providing interpreting services for the widow in this incident. In another incident, the same interpreter assisted another police agency in a complicated investigation, in this case, a woman had fallen from a hotel window and was severely injured. Suspicions were aroused when guests in the adjoining room reported hearing the sounds of "loud arguing and shouting" coming from the room just prior to the fall. Assisted by the volunteer interpreter, the police were able to determine the fall was accidental. This incident prevented an older Japanese woman from unjustifiably going to jail."<sup>iii</sup> This incident is unique in that the Volunteer Interpreter was now employed as a Police Officer and was in training at the Academy. He had started his department involvement as a volunteer. He then went on to become a police employee, and now he is part of the volunteer's training staff. Other incidents include investigation of domestic violence incidents, burglaries, robberies, etc. In addition, during a binational training with Mexican police, the Chief of Police used one of the Volunteer Interpreters to translate his welcoming remarks to a large contingent of police officers and dignitaries. This is the broad range of services the program can now provide to department employees.

Languages available include Afrikaans, Arabic, Cantonese, Dutch, Farsi, Flemish, French, German, Hebrew, Ilocano (Philippine Dialect), Italian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Malay, Mandarin, Russian, Sign Language, Spanish, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Yiddish.



Tracking the number of volunteer hours helps assess the effectiveness of the program. The City of San Diego has a very active volunteer program and regular reporting of volunteer time is required. This serves to help evaluate the use of the program. Monitoring of the program is done on a continuing basis. This is now being done by a manager who started as a volunteer and then took on the responsibilities of supervising the program. This is one of the few City of San Diego volunteer programs that is now managed in large part by a volunteer. This takes volunteer work with the Department to the next logical step: A self-running fully staffed program that is wholly composed by community members assisting the department to carry out its mission.

An anecdotal source of information is from the volunteers themselves. During quarterly meetings they report on incidents where they have responded and they debrief the incident in order to share the learning with other volunteers. The most common complaint from the volunteers is that they are still not being called out often enough.

In order to improve on this situation, the next six months will be dedicated to increased publicity for the program. Staff and volunteers will visit supervisors meetings and line-ups again. This time they will bring with them fold out cards with information about the service. These cards will also contain the simple statement "I speak (*language name*)"translated into all the available languages. This will allow officers dealing with non-English speaking people to show this card and quickly identify the language they need. Officers can then make the appropriate request from Communications Division or the Watch Commander.

As part of the assessment and modified response, the San Diego Regional Public Safety Training Institute has started training academy recruits on the use of interpreters and access to the program. One hour of training is provided letting the new officers know how to best use an interpreter and how to call for a volunteer interpreter. The program has been expanded to make it available to all law enforcement agencies in the county.

In addition to law enforcement agencies, several other public entities have sought access to the volunteer interpreters. These include the Human Relations Commission and the City Attorney's Office.

Finally, now that a good base of languages is available, recruitment will focus on the languages that are currently unavailable. Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East will be the next group of languages to be included. This will take place by the end of 1998.

**Agency and Officer Information:**

This effort has been adopted by the entire organization with full support from the office of the Chief of Police. Although the Department has not reached full use levels for the program, this is more a function of time for assimilation than a design problem.

The San Diego Police Department has received extensive training in Problem Oriented Policing and new officers receive this training as part of the basic academy. This helps the adoption of innovative solutions because the officers see this as the normal way of doing business.

The resources used by the Volunteer Police Interpreters Program are minimal. The training staff performs most of the training on duty. They teach the twenty-hour course by meeting one evening per week for four hours.

Coordination of the program is largely being done by one of the volunteers and this has greatly reduced the workload on department personnel. Equipment, supplies, and other instructional materials are obtained from existing supplies and they are minimal expenditures (under \$200 per group trained).

The office of Volunteer Services and the Background Investigations Unit provide logistical support as part of their normal workload.

The initial research into the program development revealed that there is a scarcity of Volunteer Interpreter Programs. There are programs that use volunteers and programs that use interpreters but there are few if any projects that provide the organized recruiting, training, and services included in all the components of the San Diego Police Department Volunteer Police Interpreters Program. The program is unique in all its components and in its far-reaching goals for community involvement. It deserves to be recognized as an excellent example of the finest in Problem Oriented Policing.

The following people formed the program development team, the training team, and the management staff:

- Sergeant Nathalio M. Caplan, Human Relations Core Instructor- Project design and team leader.
- Volunteer Peter Balliett (Program coordination, volunteer recruitment, publicity, and management).
- Dispatcher Bernice Castillo, Communications Division, Program development team (communications issues).
- Dispatcher Nina Cochran, Communications Division- Program development team (communications issues) and lead trainer.

- Lead Dispatcher Kimberly Collier, Communications Division, (Sign Language Issues), Communications Support.
- Lieutenant Charles Hogquist, Traffic Division (Legal and Report Writing Issues).
- Detective Michael Lambert, Mid-City Division (Investigations Issues).
- Detective Alberto Leos, Domestic Violence Unit. Training staff
- Lieutenant (now Captain) William Maheu, Central Division (S.W.A.T. and Hostage Negotiations Issues).
- Officer Tu Nguyen, Mid-City Division, Program development team (patrol issues) and assistant trainer.
- Officer Jerry Stratton, Community Relations (Community and Recruitment Issues).
- Officer Shawn Takeuchi, Western Division. Volunteer Japanese Interpreter, (now in training staff).
- Officer Tom Wetzal, Community Relations and Neighborhood Policing Unit (Volunteer Background Issues).

**Project Contact Person:**

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<sup>i</sup> 1996 U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*, 1996, U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington D.C., 1997. Table 19- Immigrants Admitted by Selected Country of Birth and Selected Metropolitan Statistical Area of Intended Residence, Fiscal Year 1996. Page 66

<sup>ii</sup> 1990 Census of Population and Housing. Category: Language Spoken at Home

<sup>iii</sup> 1990 Census of Population and Housing. Category: Language Spoken at Home and Linguistic Isolation. Universe: Persons five years and over in households.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.* | Table P, Estimated illegal Immigrant Population for Top Twenty Countries of Origin and Top Twenty States of Residence: October 1996. Page 198

<sup>v</sup> Sample billing records for the police department show this figure to average \$1000 per month

<sup>vi</sup> *The Instructional Design Process*. Jerrold Kemp, Ph. D. 1990.

<sup>vii</sup> SDPD Organizes Volunteer Translators. *The Law Enforcement Quarterly*. August-October 1996. Page 37-38

<sup>viii</sup> "Volunteer Translators Rescue Police in a Pinch." *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. November 17, 1997.