

UNIDOS

THE POLICE WORKING TOGETHER WITH THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY

Garland Police Department, Texas, 2006

THE PROBLEM: While formerly working as a Traffic Officer, Assistant Chief Steve Dye noticed a high number of arrests and an inordinate amount of traffic violations for Hispanic residents who were not proficient in English and who were unaccustomed to our American processes, systems and laws. Officer Dye found that the Hispanic residents were unable to access available resources or find proper assistance due to the lack of proficiency in the English language. He also discovered that during investigations of other crimes (i.e. homicides, assaults, robberies, etc.), there was a substantial lack of involvement among the non-English speaking Hispanic community. This lack of involvement included the non-reporting of crimes as victims, reporters, as well as the unwillingness to cooperate as witnesses due to the fear of the police.

ANALYSIS: Officer Dye found a substantial problem whereby many non-English speaking Hispanic residents lacked effective communication skills, had a lack of cultural understanding and faced an inability to find help or access reliable information. The harm that resulted from these problems included unreported crimes by Hispanics, complaints of abuse by police, unnecessary arrests for minor offenses, and an inability for these residents to fully and comfortably integrate into the community. These problems resulted in monopolizing officers' time and became costly to many Hispanics, as well as many offenders not being identified and apprehended due to a lack of witnesses and crime reporters. The main cause of the problem was the language barrier and the cultural differences, which ultimately led to mistrust. His goal was to initiate a program that was designed to garner more information from the Hispanic community referencing their specific needs and problems. The overall analysis was to narrow the scope to address basic non-English speaking Hispanic community needs, achieve mutual cultural understanding and increase trust within the Hispanic community.

RESPONSE: Officer Dye organized the UNIDOS program to develop a central resource center to address basic non-English speaking Hispanic community needs and develop mutual cultural understanding within the Hispanic community and the Garland Police Department. He utilized the Spanish media and contacted Hispanic community leaders to use as resources to better formulate a plan and strategy. He then used UNIDOS as a vehicle to educate all involved parties and assist the Hispanic community and the Garland Police Department in opening up lines of communication.

ASSESSMENT:

Officer Dye, along with Officers Berto Irizarry and Pedro Barineau, continue to use the UNIDOS program as an outreach to the Hispanic community. This has led to a substantial increase in the cooperation among many Hispanic residents and the police, as well as increased participation in neighborhood crime watch programs. This increased participation has led to more trust between the police and the Hispanic community, which has culminated in fewer necessary arrests for traffic violations, increased reporting of illegal activities, reporting of police misconduct directly to the police in lieu of the media, a better standard of living for many Hispanic immigrants, enhanced integration of Hispanics into the rest of the community, and increased identification and apprehension of offenders. UNIDOS strives to constantly improve communication between the Hispanic community and police by increased cultural understanding, open lines of communication and efforts to improve the quality of life for this portion of the community.

INTRODUCTION

During the early part of 2002, Officer Dye began to develop a plan to address the increasing number of traffic violations and arrests, a general lack of trust and the non-reporting of many major crimes involving the non-English speaking Hispanic community. He felt that this was due to residents receiving misinformation (i.e. buying a bad inspection sticker from the street corner) and the Hispanic residents' countries of origin having corrupt policing systems. While working as a Traffic Officer, he noted that the percentage of the Hispanic population was rapidly growing within in the City of Garland. This growth led him to realize that many problems associated with laws being violated and crimes going unreported were due to the lack of proficiency with the English language and being unaccustomed to our American processes, systems and laws.

Officer Dye noticed that the lack of cultural understanding was a two-way street involving many Hispanic residents, as well as members of the Garland Police Department. He believed that through mutual education there would be increased cultural awareness, which would also foster better trust between both entities. Ultimately, he envisioned the Hispanic community and the Garland Police Department working together to solve mutual problems, which many times emerged from misinformation.

SCANNING

As a police officer since 1984, Officer Dye noticed a high arrest rate and an abnormal number of traffic violations involving many Hispanic residents who were not proficient in the English language and who were unaccustomed to our countries laws and ordinances. He felt that many of these arrests and violations resulted from bad information and a lack of understanding. He also observed a lack of cultural understanding between police officers and the Hispanic community, as well as basic mistrust from the perspective of many Hispanic residents. He felt that by gaining trust, through assisting the Hispanic residents with their basic life needs, many of these problems and misunderstandings could be avoided. Officer Dye felt a need to take action since his department has no community services unit in place that could effectively target this ongoing problem involving the Hispanic community.

The aforementioned problems were due, in large part, to the lack of Spanish-speaking officers on the department and an overall lack of departmental resources to devote to the problem. Officer Dye found this issue to be substantial due to the City of Garland having a Hispanic population of more than 30% coupled with the fact that immigration from Latin countries continued to be on the rise.

Through routine traffic enforcement, Officer Dye would frequently find Hispanic motorists committing many offenses relating to bad inspection or registration stickers. He also found that many residents of the Hispanic community did not have driver's licenses, insurance or any form of identification at all. In the course of investigating the origin of these problems, Officer Dye found that many non-English speaking Hispanic residents received bad advice from other residents, which led to violations. These Hispanic residents were unfamiliar with the laws and unable to access proper resources or assistance due to the lack of proficiency in the English language. Officers' time was also consumed by the necessity to arrest these violators on minor traffic offenses that had been committed due to a lack of proper information. This, in turn, became very costly to many people in the Hispanic community.

Officer Dye also discovered that during investigations of other crimes (i.e. homicides, assaults, robberies), there was a general lack of involvement among the non-English speaking Hispanic community. This included the non-reporting of crimes as victims, reportees and witnesses based on a fear of the police and unwillingness to cooperate.

This inherent mistrust also led to a great deal of negative media attention, as many Hispanics felt such little trust between themselves and the police department that they would circumvent the Internal Affairs process and report their complaints directly to the media.

Officer Dye was married in 1990 to a Mexican National, is fluent in Spanish and has traveled to Mexico on numerous occasions. Through his personal experiences and by speaking with leaders in the Hispanic community, Officer Dye realized and came to understand that much of the lack of trust in the police was because most non-English speaking Hispanics are from Latin countries where officers are, often times, corrupt. After immigrating to the United States, many Hispanic residents carry over their engrained beliefs regarding the policing system.

Officer Dye felt the necessity to use his language skills, insight, experience and information he had learned to assist the non-English speaking Hispanic community with improving their daily

lives. He wanted to provide them with a forum that was not currently and readily available to them as many of them were new to our country. Officer Dye believed this could be achieved by providing assistance in areas of relevance to them and focusing on developing a resource center to meet their everyday needs, as well as mutual education on laws and cultures. By achieving this goal, communication and assistance between the Hispanic community and the police department would increase while mistrust would decrease.

ANALYSIS

In the early part of 2002, Officer Dye began to analyze the problems he had observed involving many non-English speaking residents of the Hispanic community. With his 22 years of police experience, mostly working in Hispanic neighborhoods, and having been married to a Mexican National for 16 years, he knew that if these issues were not addressed they would continue to have a significant negative impact to this portion of the Hispanic community and the Garland Police Department.

Officer Dye began gathering information through his professional and personal contacts, interviewing leaders of the Hispanic community and meeting with the Spanish-speaking media. Through the interviewing process, he found that many of these problems have always existed and would only worsen, if not addressed, due to the increase of immigration into the country.

The identified problems affected many members of the non-English speaking Hispanic community, as well as police agencies throughout the area. A large component of the problem that Officer Dye identified was that many non-English speaking Hispanics were hard working people with good intentions who lacked effective communication skills, had a lack of cultural understanding and the inability to find help or access information. He observed that many of the problems were due to these residents not being accustomed to our federal, state and local laws and ordinances.

Many cultural misunderstandings often included both the residents and the police officers. For example, many problems arose from municipal code ordinances, which exist in very few Latin countries. This led to some residents not

understanding why officers were responding to their homes on calls such as loud noise disturbances. Upon arrival, officers would become frustrated with the language barrier and lack of compliance, not taking into consideration the homeowner's lack of awareness that a code violation was occurring.

Numerous traffic arrests were being made due to the fact that many non-English speaking Hispanic motorists could not obtain driver's licenses and, in addition, would not carry any type of valid identification. This became costly to the offenders and began to monopolize officers' time. Officer Dye assessed this part of the problem and realized that the driver's license issue was a state level issue so he would need to find a resolution on another level.

There were many problems occurring in regard to unresolved and unreported crimes. An ongoing lack of trust was on the increase and was leading to many Hispanic residents refusing to cooperate with police officers during investigations or not reporting crimes at all. This substantial problem resulted in offenders not being identified or apprehended.

Complaints of abuse by police officers were encouraged by the department, but were not being reported on a regular basis. This was, in part, due to the language barrier, but further analysis found it to be more attributable to the lack of trust issue. Many non-English speaking Hispanic residents felt that their only recourse in reporting complaints on officers was to turn to the Spanish-speaking news media. The lack of open lines of communication spawned misinformation in the press and worsened the already existing relationships between the Garland Police Department and this segment of the community.

Officer Dye knew if this problem was not addressed there would be not a resolution and it would worsen. He also realized in order to address this problem there needed to be a way to focus on the cultural education of the non-English speaking Hispanic community and the police department. Officer Dye believed that by addressing and focusing on the basic needs of the Hispanic community, trust would be gained, which would carry over into many law enforcement related issues. Officer Dye wanted to provide a resource center that would serve the

specific needs on the non-English speaking Hispanic community and help integrate them into the rest of the community. His hopes were that this would result in unity between the police department and these residents and problems could be minimized or even eliminated. The problem was also magnified in that there was no departmental community services unit to assist with facilitation.

Officer Dye believed that in order to achieve this goal, he would need to further identify and utilize his resources in developing a deeper understanding of the problem. He began contacting leaders of the Hispanic community such as the Garland Association For Hispanic Affairs (GAFHA) and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), as well as the Spanish media (Univision, Telemundo, Spanish newspapers and radio). Officer Dye spent his own time attending meetings and consulting with the leaders of GAFHA and LULAC, at their homes, to better formulate a plan and strategy.

Officer Dye recognized that he needed a long-term project to minimize distrust and enhance cultural understanding. In 2002, Officer Dye began working on the UNIDOS program and officially unveiled it at the first meeting in February of 2003. UNIDOS, which translates to UNITED in English, was designed as a resource center to reach out to the Hispanic community and focus on information that is relevant to their everyday needs. By utilizing Spanish-speaking officers, attendees would be more comfortable in asking questions and seeking solutions to their problems at hand. The initial meetings were engineered to garner more information from the community referencing their specific needs, concerns and problems. The overall analysis resulted in narrowing the scope to address basic non-English speaking Hispanic community needs, which would result in removing suspicion and cultivating mutual cultural understanding and trust.

RESPONSE

Officer Dye organized the UNIDOS program to serve as a place where non-English speaking residents could go and feel comfortable and assured that their questions, concerns and problems would be fairly addressed. By helping with the quality of life issues, basic trust would

be gained and foster a better understanding of each other's culture. One goal of UNIDOS was to develop two-way communication between the Hispanic community and police department and offer non-police related topics that would assist in the everyday lives of recent immigrants hampered by the language barrier. Officer Dye also founded UNIDOS on paying attention to detail on the small nuances of the program, such as location and providing a social, comfortable setting.

Officer Dye soon realized that he would need assistance to sustain the UNIDOS program. Realizing the importance of continuing a program of this magnitude, he recruited Officer Alberto Irizarry (Neighborhood Police Officer) and Officer Pedro Barineau (Patrol Officer) to assist in facilitating the program. To this day, these three officers facilitate, conduct and host the meetings with the help of Hispanic community leaders and other City of Garland Departments.



The decision was made to hold the meetings entirely in Spanish to better communicate with the Hispanic residents and make them feel more comfortable in asking questions and participating in the discussions. Officer Dye had found that attempting to translate meetings negatively affected the continuity and flow of a meeting. The three officers also solicited other Spanish-speaking officers to help with the meetings so that the crowd would have the opportunity to speak with an officer one-on-one. Officer Dye felt that one-on-one time was very important at the end of the meetings as many participants may be hesitant to speak up or ask questions in front of the crowd. In addition, one of the principles of the UNIDOS programs is that if a question is asked that requires a future response, then it is imperative that the officers reply to that person.

This increases officer's credibility and is another component of the trust-building process.

The first year of the UNIDOS meetings were held at a recreation center as Officer Dye realized that, due to existing mistrust, attendance would be low if held at the police department. The recreation center provided a non-threatening place and environment where Hispanic residents would feel comfortable.

Officer Dye believed that small details at the meetings would lead to enjoyment, which would lead to friendship, which ultimately lead to trust. To that end, food would be also provided along with a festive atmosphere, including raffles and humor. Through experience, Officer Dye has learned that social events more effectively cater to Hispanic cultural preferences and create a non-threatening and inviting environment. At the meetings, officers sit amongst the crowd and interact with the attendees to make them realize that officers are also people and part of the community, as well.

To address topics of interest and relevance, bilingual speakers are brought in to provide information regarding everyday living necessities. The speakers have included agents from the Department of Public Safety, Immigration Attorneys, Code Enforcement, and Mexican Consulate employees. Representatives from banks, mortgage companies, and insurance companies have also attended to provide general information regarding those needs. During the meetings, the Spanish-speaking presenters allow for general questions and at the end Spanish-speaking officers are available to answer any law enforcement questions or pursue answers to any other questions from the participants.

Community leaders from the Hispanic community attend to show support for the program and encourage residents of the Hispanic community to attend and actively participate.

At the inception of UNIDOS, Officer Dye voluntarily chose to provide Spanish sound bites to the Spanish media on any news story in Garland. Previously, those press releases and sound bites were only done in English and the news outlets had to translate the information. In appreciation for this assistance, the Spanish media has helped UNIDOS by running

advertisements for the meetings in the form of posting graphics and running live stories the day before the meetings. This has been a tremendous help in soliciting participation and attendance at the meetings. The Spanish news outlets also recognized the unique approach of UNIDOS and covered many UNIODS meetings on their newscasts. This source of advertisement has been invaluable as the Spanish television stations are the sole source of information for many non-English speaking Hispanics.

UNIDOS was introduced to be an innovative approach through interaction with the crowd. The program was not one that was sought to be a traditional police program, but one that was unique in nature by focusing on a social atmosphere and highlighting subjects of interest to the Hispanic community. UNIDOS did not want to center on police topics as Officer Dye felt that this type of format would become stagnant over time. UNIDOS has been able to address basic needs for this part of the community, such as buying a home or getting a driver's license, and has opened up the lines of communications never before thought possible.

As a result of a history of distrust and negative past media attention, Officer Dye knew that initial attendance numbers may be low. He knew that in order to build trust among the Hispanic community it would take time and perseverance. He wanted to build a lasting program that would provide resources that would assist and educate non-English speaking Hispanic residents while establishing trust. He envisioned the meetings acting as a conduit to enable the factions to unite and work together in communicating and understanding each other. As a result, more crimes would be reported and many legal problems could be avoided.

ASSESSMENT

The initiation of UNIDOS by the Garland Police Department was well received by Hispanic residents. The initial meetings over the first two year averaged an attendance of 25 participants. However, over the last two years, the program has continued to grow and now averages 90 attendees at the meetings, which are held every other month. UNIDOS has served as a vehicle to convey information, in Spanish, that is of importance to the non-English speaking Hispanic residents of Garland. It has also grown to unite

the Hispanic community and the police department, which has resulted in mutual cultural understanding and a feeling of trust.

Through gaining trust at the ground level by providing for assistance in the daily lives of people, UNIDOS has been able to also help educate many folks in the laws and processes unique to our country. Fewer traffic arrests are now being made as UNIDOS has helped many obtain their driver's licenses, while helping others obtain Matriculas. UNIDOS worked with the Mexican Consulate and spear-headed the departmental sanctioning of the Matricula as a valid form of identification. This has resulted in many people not being arrested on traffic violations for not having any type of identification on their person.

The push for obtaining Matriculas and education on utilizing banks and savings accounts has reduced the number of robberies in apartment complexes that are predominately Hispanic. This has been attributed to many Hispanic residents now using banks in lieu of carrying cash on their persons. UNIDOS helped in this crime prevention and reduction process by education and the translation of printed materials, as well as discussing these issues at meetings and with the Spanish news media.

The population of the Hispanic community in the City of Garland is over 30%, which calculates to about 65,000 Hispanic residents. Due to the high number of Hispanic residents within the City of Garland, Officer Dye knew it would be impossible to contact each person. Although the obstacle presented a dilemma, he utilized the assistance of the Spanish media, newspapers and community leaders as support and to advertise UNIDOS within the Hispanic community. This network and form of advertising has worked well. Officer Barineau has recently begun speaking at Spanish-speaking churches, which has significantly improved meeting attendance numbers.

UNIDOS has facilitated better cooperation even among many Hispanic residents as there has been an increase in Hispanic participation in neighborhood crime watch programs. This has resulted in an increase in calls reporting illegal activities in apartment complexes and residential areas. Some of these calls have culminated in several evictions and the arrests of many

criminals. The UNIDOS meetings have become a central location for receiving information regarding illegal narcotics activity, which has led to many narcotic arrests where drugs and cash have been seized. There has also been a decline in code violations due to increased understanding of municipal ordinances. The quantitative results are difficult to enumerate due to the broad spectrum of change. A substantial portion of the change has been attitudinal on the part of the Hispanic community and police officers.

Since the inception of UNIDOS, the trust and communication between the Hispanic community and Garland Police Department has grown beyond expectations. The meetings have transitioned from the recreation center to the Garland Police Department. Hispanic residents now feel that the police station is their station. This has given them a sense of ownership in the community and they no longer hesitate to come to the station to contact Internal Affairs, request a copy of a report, etc.

Complaints from Hispanic residents that were most previously made to the Spanish media have also transitioned to the Garland Police Department. This has increased the number of complaints from the Spanish-speaking public directly to the Garland Police Department, but has reduced the overall number of complaints when you factor in those previously made to the media outlets.

Non-police questions at meetings have indicated that trust is being gained. For example, questions have included how to find a plumber for a home, how to get insurance for vehicles and how to obtain a home loan, among others. When Spanish-speaking officers are asked questions to which they did not know the answers, a follow-up phone call is made to get the information to the residents. By responding to the Hispanic residents in this manner, credibility has improved and trust has been gained.

The language barrier and cultural differences have presented large obstacles to overcome. UNIDOS has been a forum to allow many non-English speaking Hispanic residents to feel a part of the community. This has been achieved by providing a non-threatening environment in which these residents can come and obtain information regarding non-police related issues.

The UNIDOS program has impacted the Hispanic community in the City of Garland in a way that was never thought possible. The UNIDOS program has now been adopted by the Dallas, Plano, Richardson and El Cenizo, Texas Police Departments. The Garland Police Department currently holds one meeting every two months to continue reaching out to the Hispanic community. The Dallas Police Department UNIDOS program is hosting meetings in different parts of their city every month. The Plano and Richardson Police Departments hold UNIDOS meetings every other month. Other cities have also expressed interest in the program and UNIDOS hosts its own website at www.programaunidos.org. The participating agencies meet quarterly for discussion and information sharing in order to strengthen the program. UNIDOS has also developed a regional e-mail and phone notification system, for participating agencies, as a means of meeting reminders in addition to the media sources.

Chief Dye has spoken on the development of the UNIDOS program at the Texas Regional Community Policing Institute Conference hosted by Sam Houston State University. He was invited to share information on the small nuances of this non-traditional approach, as well as the low cost to departments to institute an UNIDOS program. Articles on the UNIDOS program have been written in the Dallas Morning News and by the Associated Press.

AGENCY AND OFFICER INFORMATION

Assistant Chief Dye implemented this Problem-Oriented Policing project, however, due to the magnitude and scope of the problem; he soon realized he would need assistance. He subsequently recruited Officers Irizarry and Barineau to assist in facilitating the program. These officers head up the meetings by organizing speakers, contacting the media, and notifying the Hispanic community of the respective topics.

Assistant Chief Steve Dye began law enforcement career in 1984 with the Houston Police Department. Through his experience of working in Hispanic neighborhoods and personal history, he noticed an increasing need to reach out to non-English speaking Hispanic residents. As a result of his training and experience was

able to identify the increasing problem that was occurring within the Hispanic community.

Assistant Chief Dye and Officers Irizarry and Barineau have engaged in this problem solving solution on their own time and in addition to their regular departmental duties in their 326-man department. The officers' motivation for UNIDOS has been guided by their desire to unite the Hispanic community with the Garland Police Department and to develop a central resource center where non-English speaking Hispanic residents can improve their daily lives.

The Garland Police Department has made it possible for these officers to foster this program. In the course of identifying the need to reach to a community so large and detached from the American culture, process and laws, the Garland Police Department observed a necessity for resolving this ever-increasing problem.

In the beginning, Assistant Chief Dye noticed how the lack of proficiency in the English language, lack of cultural understanding and mistrust affected the Hispanic community and the police department. However, he soon realized that the problem was far more involved than first suspected and he understood that in order to address the problem it had to be approached from a more comprehensive perspective. As a result, UNIDOS was born. By initiating UNIDOS, Chief Dye and Officers Irizarry and Barineau were able to open up lines of communication and knock down barriers of distrust between the Hispanic community and police agencies throughout the metroplex.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Assistant Chief Steve Dye
Badge #3470
Assistant Chief Patrol
1891 Forest Lane
Garland, Texas 75042
Office: 972-205-1683
Cell: 214-458-8991
Fax: 972-485-4802
E-mail: dyes@ci.garland.tx.us

Officer Berto Irizarry
Badge #5236
Neighborhood Police Officer
1891 Forest Lane
Garland, Texas 75042
Office: 972-485-4857
Pager: 214-878-0644
E-mail: irizarrya@ci.garland.tx.us

Officer Pedro Barineau
Badge #6173
Patrol Officer
1891 Forest Lane
Garland, Texas 75042
Voice Mail: 972-205-2020
Pager: 972-879-9000
E-mail: barineaup@ci.garland.tx.us

UNIDOS Website: www.programaunidos.org

Garland Police Department Website
www.ci.garland.tx.us/Home/Departments/Public+Safety/Police/

City of Garland Website
www.ci.garland.tx.us/Home

Garland Morning News

COMMUNITY

Unidos to help Hispanics navigating legal system

Monthly meetings will try to build trust in police while teaching

By RICHARD ABSHIRE
Staff Writer

Officer Steve Dye saw his duty and he did it.

As a motorcycle officer making traffic stops, he saw many Hispanics who were struggling with a legal system that was alien to them. So he came up with an idea he

called Unidos, Spanish for united.

Beginning at 7 p.m. Feb. 11, that idea will take the form of monthly meetings at Gale Fields Recreation Center, 1701 Dairy Road. Hispanics can learn how to buy car insurance, get their vehicles registered and inspected, get driver's licenses, deal with police, traffic tickets and the criminal justice system, and find answers to questions or referrals to expert sources.

"Sometimes I stop people with fake inspection stickers," Officer

Dye said. "When I tell them how to do it right, they are really thankful."

Garland police spokesman Lt. Don Martin applauded Officer Dye's idea.

"He's been developing it for the past year," Lt. Martin said. "I think it will be a wonderful opportunity for us to work toward a better relationship and for members of the Hispanic community to feel more comfortable here. Through this process, we hope they will become more comfort-

able with us and ask questions about why we do the things we do."

Tony Torres, president of the Garland Association for Hispanic Affairs, said Officer Dye had spoken to him about his idea.

"To me, it's a good outreach effort and for him to take it on himself to begin this speaks well for him," Mr. Torres said.

Mr. Torres said he didn't know how much support Officer Dye would get from his department or the community.

"We were very impressed," Mr. Torres said. "We will help him any way we can."

Officer Dye, an 18-year police veteran who is fluent in Spanish, said he believes that when you see a need you are able to address, it's your duty to do something about it.

"I guess I'm just lucky," he said. "I have a good ear to pick up a second language."

That gift came in handy when

See GROUP Page 2Q

Group to help Hispanics navigate legal system

Continued from Page 1Q

he met and married Noemi, who grew up in Guanajuato, Mexico. They are raising their daughters — Gabriela, 9, and Stephanie, 8 — to be bilingual.

Officer Dye is spending off-duty time to make Unidos a success. He said the first couple months may be slow but he is committed to stick with it for at least a year.

"I think it's probably here to stay," he said. "My intention is that after I'm gone, there will still be a Unidos."

He said it is important for the

police to earn the trust of Hispanics who are often wary of authorities because of their experience in their homelands.

He sees Unidos as a two-way street that will lead to more voluntary compliance with the law and a bond of trust between Hispanics and the police.

"I want to educate them and help them lead law-abiding lives," he said. "I want them to understand that the Police Department is different here."

E-mail rabshire@dallasnews.com
or call 972-272-6591, ext. 244.

Police reach out to Hispanics with new Unidos program

Plano: Informational sessions discuss bureaucratic processes

By **JAKE BATSELL**
Staff Writer

For many Hispanic immigrants, the police badge is a symbol of distrust.

Encounters with police corruption in Latin America often leave immigrants wary of law enforcement in the American cities where they resettle.

Hoping to ease such tensions, Plano police have launched a new program, Unidos, in which Spanish-speaking officers conduct informational sessions about navigating U.S. bureaucracy.

"The goal of the program is to gain the trust of the Hispanic community," said Officer Richard Perez, who on Tuesday night led a packed meeting focusing on how to get a driver's license.

Plano's Unidos program mirrors an effort established three years ago in Garland. Irving and Arlington are among other local cities that offer Hispanic outreach programs. Officer Perez said Richardson police are considering something similar.

It apparently has created a buzz — the Plano debut session in August drew 120 participants, and last week's second meeting attracted an overflow crowd of more than 200 at the Practical Parent Education building north of downtown.

Officers answered attendees' questions and distributed fliers with a touch of hospitality. Adults were offered soft drinks and pecan pie, while about 50 children watched cartoons and played in a child-care room next door.

Lauro Gamez, who was born in Mexico but has lived and worked in Plano for 10 years, said he came to the Unidos



JUAN GARCIA/Staff Photographer

Officer Jaime Garcia offers attendees handouts during a meeting for Plano's Unidos program, which mirrors an effort started three years ago in Garland.

meeting because he had questions about the renewal process for driver's licenses.

Mr. Gamez said that although he no longer harbors suspicions toward police, others do. But he said officers at the meeting made clear that their role is to help and protect.

"They're looking for the bad guys," Mr. Gamez said. "They're not looking for people who don't have papers."

Dessiree Silva, who moved to Plano two years ago from Mexico City, said she's happy with Unidos "because the police are interested in the Hispanic people who don't have any information. I appreciate their work."

Creating a safe, friendly atmosphere is the point, Officer Perez said.

"Hopefully, at the end of the night, they can say to themselves, 'You know what, maybe they are here to help us. We asked them questions, and they gave us honest answers,'" he said.

Police said they are trying to demystify bureaucratic processes so attendees can learn information that will protect them from scams such as fake ID cards, driver's licenses and vehicle registrations.

"We're trying to get them a location where they can come, ask questions and get the right information," Plano Sgt. Frank McElligott said. "Because if they get the right information, our worlds won't collide."

Cecilia Prada, vice president of the Collin County chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens, said she's encouraged by the Unidos program because "the trust level is so limited" between immigrants and police.

"Some of them, because they're undocumented, are afraid to ever attend any kind of function," Ms. Prada said.

Mortgage lenders and insurance brokers made brief presentations at the end of Tuesday's meeting, which Ms. Prada said made her and some other attendees uncomfortable. But she commended Plano police for organizing the program and said that if future meetings were free of commercial pitches, attendance will continue to be strong.

"It's a great program, and it's only going to grow," she said.

The next Unidos meeting is scheduled for Dec. 20.

E-mail jbatsell@dallasnews.com

Garland PD Promoting Hispanic Outreach Program

(AP) GARLAND When a group of men posing as police officers robbed several Hispanic immigrants, not all the victims reported the crimes to the real authorities.

The reason for their silence is simple, many immigrants said while meeting with police: "Tienen miedo," meaning "They're afraid."

"Yes, sometimes you get afraid. It's not because you're doing anything bad. Lots of times, because you're Hispanic, people don't want you around," said Irma Delgado, a 34-year-old Mexican immigrant.

Fear of police and deportation makes illegal immigrants easy targets for criminals, prompting police departments around the country to try outreach programs designed to build trust with residents.

One program developed in Garland called Unidos, which is Spanish for "united," has yielded such promising results that Dallas began using it in February. The suburb of Richardson is planning to use it in May, and several Texas departments are considering it.

Unidos features meetings on topics relevant to immigrants. Departments bring in guest speakers and hand out door prizes. Spanish-speaking officers are always available and stress that police won't single them out if they are living in the country illegally.

"It's focused not so much on the esoteric concerns on immigration policy ... but on enabling officers to become more aware of the day-to-day issues and people to navigate those day-to-day issues," said Phillip Lyons, executive director of the Texas Regional Community Policing Institute at Sam Houston State University.

With more than 31 million people in the U.S. who were born abroad, including an estimated 11 million living here illegally, some departments want to involve immigrants in community policing programs, experts say.

There's no way to tell how many departments are using outreach programs and they vary greatly, said Gilbert Moore of the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services at the U.S. Department of Justice. Some publish crime prevention materials in Spanish or other languages, while others provide cultural training for police and residents.

For example, Austin police coordinated with the Mexican consulate and area banks so undocumented workers could open accounts, helping reduce the number of robberies. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina created an International Relations Unit.

Several Clearwater, Fla., officers were sent to the Mexican state of Hidalgo so they could learn about the place and culture many immigrants were coming from. Departments from Corcoran, Calif., to Dallas have set up citizen police academies in Spanish.

It's unclear how such outreach programs could be affected by immigration measures being considered in Congress. The House approved a measure to enlist local authorities to enforce immigration laws, but the Senate continues discussion on other measures.

Regardless of the outcome in Washington, advocates say outreach programs are crucial because immigrants are vulnerable to street crime and scams since they don't have proper documents for traditional banking or aren't fluent in English.

"The system is taking advantage of these people, not just robbing them," said Joe Campos, the League of United Latin American Citizens national executive manager. "They know they won't complain."

Before Garland Police Assistant Chief Steve Dye started Unidos in 2003, the department had faced a series of police shootings involving Hispanics, a string of muggings of undocumented workers, and the killing of an immigrant during a robbery.

Still, many immigrants steered clear of the police station.

"A lot of the community members were afraid," said Koni Ramos-Kaiwi, a member of the Garland council of the League of United Latin American Citizens in Texas. "They would shy away from calling the police."

At the same time, police say, recent immigrants were finding themselves on the wrong side of the law often because they didn't speak English or were misinformed.

But in the 2 1/2 years since Unidos began, attendance at the meetings regularly surpasses 100 and more crimes are getting reported, Dye

said.

At a recent meeting, about 100 people, most of them immigrants, packed into police headquarters.

They listened intently as police warned about the men who struck mainly Hispanic neighborhoods and robbed their victims while pretending to search them. Although they haven't robbed anyone since, police say similar robberies have happened in Dallas and Fort Worth suburbs over the past year.

Residents munched on food, drank punch and asked a variety of questions. They wanted to know how a new ordinance to tow uninsured vehicles would work, which office to go to for a driver's license, and much more.

Most importantly, police say, they learned to trust the authorities.

"We all had another concept of police in Garland, that they would mistreat us," said Delgado, who has attended the meetings. "I've learned a lot of things, mainly, that they're here to help us."