

Meeting the Challenge of Linguistic Diversity

New Jersey Municipalities, March, 2009

By Nicholas V. Montalto

Effective communication between public servants and constituents is the sine qua non of good governance -- crucial to the delivery of public services, the planning and execution of major community projects, and the creation of more inclusive communities. Communication takes on even greater significance against the backdrop of globalization, which profoundly changes how people, communities and nations interact with one another and how public and private organizations serve their constituencies. New ideas and possibilities, new rules and procedures, and even new values are being embraced by municipal leaders who see opportunities, rather than threats, in these changes. The accelerated movement of people, whether for pleasure, study, business, work, survival, or retirement, is one of the major driving forces of these changes.

In New Jersey, immigration has brought profound transformations to many communities and created communication challenges for local government. Eleven percent of New Jersey's population age five or over, numbering 962,993 persons, of whom 806,631 are immigrants, have difficulty speaking English. The problem is not confined to the Spanish-speaking population; almost half (46%) of the state's so-called limited English proficient (LEP) immigrant population speak languages other than Spanish. Although LEP populations are concentrated in certain communities, their dispersal throughout the State is probably the most remarkable development of the last two decades. According to the 2007 American Community survey, towns like West New York in Hudson County, New Brunswick in Middlesex, and Elizabeth in Union maintained their status as major immigration hubs with LEP percentages in excess of 30%. However, the survey, which covers only the 66 towns with populations above 20,000, revealed that 21 towns now had LEP percentages above 20%, including Fort Lee in Bergen County, Bridgeton in Cumberland, Trenton in Mercer, North Plainfield in Middlesex, Long Branch in Monmouth, and Atlantic City in Ocean. We don't know how many towns under 20,000 in population have sizeable LEP populations, but certainly places like Dover, Freehold Borough, and Hightstown are in the over-20% category.

Throughout New Jersey and around the country, many municipalities are devising innovative and cost-effective approaches to the challenge of communication in the global age. Larger cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., have the resources to establish separate offices to promote immigrant integration. But smaller cities and towns are also addressing this issue in effective ways. Technological advances, including telephone and video interpreting, as well as machine translation, are driving down costs for cash-strapped local budgets, and many municipalities are tapping linguistic resources within their own staff and communities, including qualified volunteers. The City of New Haven, for example, publishes a

multilingual resource directory of city employees who speak 19 languages and who can serve as communication bridges with the LEP population. The Police Department in the City of Nashville has developed a roster of community volunteers on call two days a month to provide telephone interpreting to officers in the field. Some local governments are making creative use of new technology, such as inexpensive headphone systems, which make it possible for bilingual employees, community volunteers, or professional per-diem interpreters to provide simultaneous interpretation for meetings conducted in English. As more and more local government services are delivered via the internet, web site translation takes on greater importance as a means of communicating with LEP residents and bridging the “digital divide.” A number of municipalities in New Jersey, including Dover, Newark, and Secaucus, are using machine translation tools on their web sites. Although accuracy of machine translations is improving, error rates are still high, and such tools should be used with caution and never as a substitute for a multi-faceted immigrant communication program.

For municipalities seeking to engage their LEP populations through the medium of native languages, a few practical suggestions can be drawn from the experience of localities that have pioneered in this area. A basic first step would be to assign responsibility for language access to one or more municipal employees motivated and able to provide leadership in this area. A careful review of community demographics, resources, and needs should undergird the effort. The goal should be the development of a realistic language access plan, with benchmarks and procedures for periodic monitoring and updating. Models of such plans are available from several sources. Among agencies in New Jersey that have crafted such plans are the Administrative Office of the Courts, New Jersey Transit, and a number of hospitals. As part of this process, local governments should review personnel policies to ensure that foreign language skills and cultural understanding are integrated into hiring and career advancement criteria. They should also recognize the importance of staff training, including language sustainment training for bilingual staff, to the successful implementation of their plans. There is no “cookie-cutter” approach to language access. Every municipality will approach the challenge in a different way because solutions must be tailored to the needs, circumstances, and resources of each municipality.

The use of non-English languages by municipal government has sparked controversies in some communities, a recent example of which was the “English First” charter referendum in the City of Nashville, which went down to defeat on January 22. One argument often raised against language accommodations is that such efforts slow the language learning process by weakening the incentive to learn English. In this view, if you make it too easy for people, they’ll put off learning the new language. Proponents of this argument often assert that a “do or die” philosophy prevailed earlier in American history and that yesterday’s immigrants had to scale the wall of English in order to survive. The reality of the past, however, was quite different. A

hundred years ago, during the great wave of immigration preceding World War I, local leaders and civic groups not only mounted a campaign to “Americanize” immigrants by opening up English and citizenship classes but also systematically reached out to immigrants in their native languages. In New Jersey, for example, a network of settlement houses, international institutes, and special immigrant outreach programs -- numbering at least 13 by my count -- were established to address the needs of Czech, Italian, Polish and other immigrant communities. All employed bilingual workers. This “both/and” approach made sense then, and it makes sense now.

Beyond the importance of effective communication for service delivery and governance purposes, home language communication breaks down the isolation of immigrant communities and enables immigrants to become more engaged in civic life and to express their views and perspectives on local issues. Multilingual communication also sends a message of recognition and welcome that helps to create more harmonious and cohesive communities.

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