

Understanding Language and Cultural Barriers on 911 Calls

A survey of LanguageLine Solutions 911 interpreters identified key language and cultural issues that complicate 911 calls. These are grouped below with interpreter tips for overcoming the issues. Would these work for your PSAP?

PROBLEMS WITH ADDRESSES - What complicates getting address information?

- Knowing Your ABC's - Speakers of languages like Arabic, Mandarin, or Russian with different alphabets may have a hard time spelling a street name if they aren't familiar with the Latin letters we use in English.
- Cultural Concept of "Address" - Callers may not be familiar with the way addresses are set up in the U.S. They may try to use landmarks to describe their location instead.
- Ignorance of Address - Recent immigrants may have a hard time simply knowing their address, apartment complex name, and nearby streets. This information may take a lot of time to confirm.

- TIPS**
- Team up with interpreter to clarify data and work through available information
 - If dispatcher has address information, ask LEP caller to confirm it
 - Suggest finding a piece of mail, using landmarks or descriptions to assist

GETTING TO THE POINT - English is a direct language and gets to the point. Other cultures take an indirect approach, and may feel the need to:

- Describe the events leading up to the emergency, telling you the whole story.
- Provide you information about themselves

- TIPS**
- Ask the caller to tell you "briefly" in 1 or 2 sentences
 - Explain the speed of response depends on short, direct answers
 - Have patience. Indirect communication is an unavoidable cultural issue

FEAR OF AUTHORITIES - Immigrants to the U.S. may bring multiple concerns from their home countries:

- Assuming authorities are oppressive, corrupt and intimidating
- Bringing in authorities could raise immigration/deportation risks for family and friends
- Calling authorities will have repercussions within the family

- TIPS**
- Maintain friendly, helpful tone with LEP callers
 - Provide explanation why the information is needed
 - Have patience

LANGUAGE AND DIALECT - Professional interpreters will ask for clarification when needed.

- Regional Dialects - Many languages, like Spanish, Arabic, and even Burmese have regional dialects with different meanings for the same word or different words for the same thing. Understanding the real meaning is a challenge for the interpreter, who may need to clarify.
- Use of "Second Languages" - LEP callers whose native language is rare often request an interpreter for a more common language. A caller from Africa may request French; a caller from the former Soviet Union may request Russian. In these cases the French or Russian interpreter may be speaking to a caller with limited proficiency in the second language, a regional accent and local language variations. The interpreter may need to ask for clarification.

- TIPS**
- Use simple language
 - Let interpreter clarify
 - Trust the interpreter's skills

FOR MORE INFORMATION 1-800-752-6096 or info@languageline.com

This information is an excerpt from the training presentation "AY Caramba!": Understanding Language and Cultural Barriers on 911 Calls.

