

# LINGUISTS NEEDED IN TIME FOR DISASTER PLANNING

Isabel Frammer

*The 2007 Federal Interagency Conference on Limited English Proficiency held on March 15-16 in Washington, D.C. included a panel entitled "The Importance of LEP Planning in Meeting the Challenges Associated with Responding to Disasters." The panel speakers were: Everette Jordan, Director of the National Virtual Translation Center; Isabel Frammer, NAJIT Board member; Rebekah Tosado, Esq., Director for Review and Compliance in the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Department of U.S. Homeland Security; Juliet Choi, Esq., Senior Associate for the National Partnership Development with the Preparedness and Response Department of the American Red Cross. The following is an edited excerpt of the remarks by NAJIT's representative.*

**W**e have a national problem that affects all government agencies in their ability to carry out their job: we suffer from a lack of qualified interpreters. There are few incentives to recruit and retain existing certified and qualified interpreters, and a lack of awareness of how to tap into existing resources. Even when resources are available or rules in place, agencies resort to hiring unqualified individuals because they are cheaper.

Interpreters eventually have to move or find other full time jobs not related to the field. Aspiring interpreters have no incentive to seek education or certification because there are no long term payoffs.

The media has widely reported a shortage of qualified interpreters. In recent legislative hearings, Senators Akaka, Voinovich, Kohl and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Kennedy have highlighted their concern about this shortage.

In reality we have a couple of thousand federal and state court certified Spanish interpreters, hundreds of qualified individuals in other languages, thousands of practicing but untrained bilinguals and many aspiring interpreters. Yet we are still lacking in funding for training or certification efforts.

Certified and qualified interpreters have skills that go beyond bilingualism. When we speak of skills, we are not referring to language proficiency or the learning of specialized vocabulary, although these are crucial components. The skills we speak of are cognitive skills: possessing the ability to listen, comprehend, retain, reproduce and transfer information from one language into another language, without distorting or losing meaning. These skills require years of practice and cannot be developed overnight or in the course of a few interviews, hearings or medical appointments.

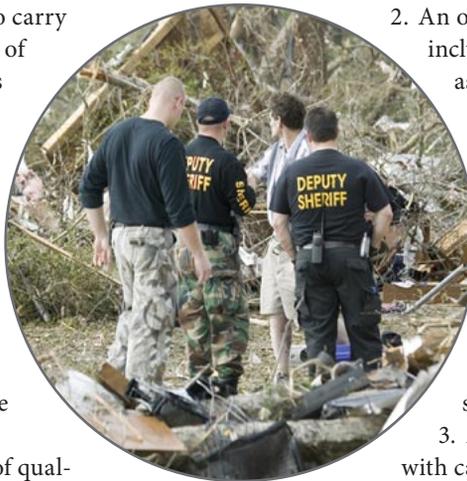
Communication problems affect people's rights, equal access, equal protection, health, life, safety, and national security.

Because I work in the field, I see and hear first hand some of the tragedies that take place at every level of our justice system due to the use of unqualified and untrained bilinguals as "interpreters" or because there are no policies in place. Let me give you a few examples.

1. A police department received a 911 call from Spanish speaking individuals reporting a fire in a building. There was no policy in place to provide language services. Additional calls in Spanish were made, but it wasn't until they received a fourth call in English that the fire department was dispatched to the location. When they arrived, seven people were dead.
2. An officer who took a Spanish immersion course, including a department paid trip to Mexico, served as interpreter in an interrogation. The officer was not sufficiently bilingual and the suspect spoke limited English. They both resorted to Spanglish (a mixture of English and Spanish). The suspect began to confess to something but, since his account was so distorted, no one could determine exactly what he was confessing to. The case resulted in a lesser charge and a sentence of probation. This was a matter of an alleged sodomy of a six-year-old child.
3. A 37-year-old Korean woman was diagnosed with cancer. One evening after receiving chemotherapy treatment for several hours she tried to tell the medical staff that she was tired and wanted to go home for the night. The nurse gave her a "consent to terminate treatment" form, which she signed, thinking she was agreeing only to be released for the night. She didn't hear from the hospital again for several months. When she did go back, the cancer was everywhere and impossible to contain. She died shortly thereafter.

The above cases are few of many, and to begin to address our deficiencies and avert further tragedies, we need to begin to develop the connective tissue between professional organizations and governmental agencies. We need to build relationships that allow the flow of best practices and information so we can get the job done right the first time. Government agencies only need to tap into already established resources and form partnerships with

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## Conclusion

Due process rights are best preserved with faithful simultaneous interpretation of legal proceedings. Court interpreters work for the judiciary and their goal is accuracy and completeness, not a particular party's agenda. In a controlled study, it was shown that interpreters' work quality decreases after 30 minutes. In the challenging courtroom environment, team interpreting ensures that the comprehension effort required to provide accurate interpretation is not compromised. To deliver unassailably accurate language service, court interpreters work in teams. ▲

### References:

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7 See *People vs. Aguilar* (1984) 35 Cal. 3d 785, 790 (California appellate case) and *Negrón vs. New York* (434 F 2d 386, 2nd Circuit, 1970) (federal appellate case).

8 Vidal, Mirta. 1997. "New Study on Fatigue Confirms Need for Working in Teams" *Proteus*, Vol. VI (1).

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those who already have expertise and experience in translation and interpretation.

Many experts in the field suggested that a government sponsored national database of certified and qualified individuals be prepared for national emergency response. The National Virtual Translation Center organized the infrastructure. NAJIT and NVTC worked together to recruit certified and qualified interpreters for the database. Currently the NVTC has 1,000 interpreters and translators representing 60 languages in the database.

This database is essential for national emergency preparedness and response and should be tapped into not just in times of national emergency, but for other Government work, thus, creating an incentive for the recruitment and retention of qualified individuals. It is also important to have one single entity (a hub). Having one single point of contact will avoid confusion and replication of work already done. Forming partnerships among organizations and entities is the best way to accomplish what no entity can do on its own.

NAJIT has developed other partnerships, such as with SAKHI for South Asian Women and Sanctuary for Families.

Before any policies were in place for law enforcement, NAJIT worked with Ohio local law enforcement in Summit/Lorain county to create a model policy manual to address many of the language problems that affect law enforcement's ability to serve and protect all persons. The Summit/Lorain initiative has been replicated by other law enforcement agencies in other states.

The collaborative effort moved from the local level to a state-wide collaboration with the Ohio Criminal Justice Services (OCJS), a division of the Ohio Department of Public Safety. OCJS, together with NAJIT and ATA, created a language identification booklet titled "I Speak" in 47 languages, which had national and international distribution. These and many other types of initiatives can also be encouraged at the federal level with all of us joining forces:

NAJIT's experts, consultants and trainers, the NVTC and the American Red Cross.

We need to move forward with a more coordinated plan and partnerships with all of the necessary stakeholders. Certified and qualified interpreters are the nexus between all government entities and the LEP population. As communicators, we know that without communication, nothing can happen. ▲

*At the American Red Cross, we recognize the changing and dynamic demographics of so many local communities across the country and the growing unmet needs of individuals and families requiring language assistance. We take particular note of the absolute need and wonderful opportunity to partner with organizations with specialized expertise such as NAJIT so that collectively and collaboratively we may better serve the LEP, immigrant and disability communities. On behalf of the Red Cross, it is with great pride that I am able to share with you that earlier this year, NAJIT and the American Red Cross agreed to a formal partnership in principle. Over the weeks to come, we will sit down and hammer out the practical next steps of the partnership which will include, among other activities, NAJIT members becoming part of the Red Cross disaster team while educating us about how to better incorporate language assistance practices into our disaster work. We are delighted and grateful for this partnership.*

*NAJIT, please accept our heartfelt thanks for partnering with the American Red Cross.*

*—Juliet Choi*