

Proposal for Language Translation Services for PSAPs

Submitted by Major City Police Chiefs Organization – April 2005

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- William Mullen, Springfield Police
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**1. Background**

The Major City Chiefs 911 Report focused on many critical unmet needs in PSAPs.

One of the key needs raised in the report involves having the resources to handle 911 calls received from persons who do not speak English.

Many PSAPs, especially those in urban areas with larger numbers of residents who are immigrants or descendants of recent immigrants, report the receipt of 911 calls from persons that do not speak English.

The 2000 US Census for Massachusetts reports that 53,160 persons counted in the Census as residents speak English “Not at All” and another 160,266 speak English “Not Well”.

English-Speaking Abilities from Massachusetts’ Census 2000

		Ability to Speak English		
		<u>Not Well</u>	<u>Not at All</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Native-born	Spanish	27,882	9,573	37,455
	Other Info-European	11,500	711	12,211
	Asian & Pacific Island	2,621	201	2,822
	Other Languages	465	67	532
Foreign-born	Spanish	30,140	15,079	45,219
	Other Info-European	56,401	17,533	73,934
	Asian & Pacific Island	28,968	9,593	38,561
	Other Languages	<u>2,289</u>	<u>403</u>	<u>2,692</u>
		160,266	53,160	213,426

These numbers do not include additional persons who are undocumented or illegal aliens, or those who are non-English-speaking visitors (whose numbers have grown in the last few years).

What can we deduce from the above facts about how many people in the state cannot communicate with a 911 dispatcher in English? It is assumed that there is wide variation among the ability of those reporting that they speak English “Not well”; but that at least half may have great difficulties. It is assumed that there is a large – but unknown - number of undocumented or illegal aliens who do not speak English not captured in the census figures. It is further assumed that there is a modest – but unknown - number of visitors on any given day (largest in the summertime especially in tourist areas like the Cape and metro Boston) that cannot speak English. The total of all these numbers is probably well in excess of 100,000 persons.

## **2. Possible Solutions**

There are a variety of approaches to having PSAPs understand the languages of all callers.

### **A. Hire Foreign-Language Speaking Dispatchers**

Some PSAPs in municipalities with large numbers of residents that do not speak English have hired, and will continue to hire, dispatchers who speak key other languages such as Spanish and Portuguese.

The benefit to this is that a trained dispatcher is able to converse with callers immediately and deal with their needs immediately and broadly.

The shortcomings to this approach are several. First, the dispatcher who speaks Spanish may not be available on the shift actually receiving the 911 call in Spanish. Second, a PSAP may have a Spanish-speaking dispatcher, but they cannot understand a caller speaking Cambodian or Haitian-Creole.

### **B. Use Over-the-Phone Language Interpretation Services**

Another approach that can be used to supplement or supplant the approach in A above, is to provide PSAPs with a service that provides language interpreters on-demand. A number of PSAPs already use over-the-phone interpreter services, and they have proved invaluable.

An over-the-phone language interpreter service works as follows:

1. An emergency call is received at a PSAP from a person who cannot speak English, but who is obviously agitated and who starts talking in an unknown language.
2. The 911 dispatcher immediately conferences in a “initial interpreter” from a firm providing over-the-phone language interpreter services and that person listens to the caller and converses with them if they speak a common language (e.g., Spanish) and tells the 911 dispatcher the nature of the emergency and serves as an interpreter in the 911 caller-911 dispatcher dialogue.
3. If the “initial interpreter” does not speak the language of the caller, they “triage the language” and bring into the teleconference a native speaker of that language. Most firms in the emergency over-the-phone language interpreter business have available speakers of 100-200 languages.

The principle advantages of this approach are that is always available in a large number of languages.

### 3. **Recommendation**

911 should be available to all citizens regardless of their ability to speak English. The SETB is proud to offer extensive services to the deaf and hard-of-hearing community through the provision of TTDs as a central part of the basic 911 telephone equipment. It should also be proud to make 911 available to those citizens and visitors who do not speak English.

We recommend that the state 911 program or its 911 Vendor:

**A. Contract with an established over-the-phone language interpreting service that meets the needs of Massachusetts PSAPs**

There are many economies of scale if a single statewide contract was maintained by the SETB or its 911 Vendor.

**B. Provide individual IDs to each PSAP so that they may access and use the service at any time for emergency calls.**

Each PSAP would receive an ID allowing it to access and use the service for emergency calls.

**C. Pay for the costs of the service from 911 surcharge funds beginning in FY06**

It is estimated that the costs of over-the-phone language translation services would be between \$50,000 to a max of \$100,000/year statewide if a single vendor provided service through the SETB or its 911 system contractor. The Minnesota 911 program, for example, pays about \$38,000/year for its service in a state with somewhat less population than Massachusetts:

“Using Minnesota state contract (T-640), the 911 Program pays Language Line \$1.40 per minute for all languages and the average annual cost is \$38,000 for 136 PSAPs. Population of Minnesota is 4.9 million. This company usually bills a \$50 minimum charge to customers but since ours is a statewide account, the minimum charge never applies. (MaryKay Frisch, Minn 911).