

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2005 · VOLUME 87 · NUMBER 1

[Wanted: Language and Cultural Competence](#)

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Elizabeth Kellar, Washington, D.C..

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[Anatomy of a Referendum*](#)

The story of one Wisconsin community during a form-of-government referendum.

Steven E. Sheiffer, Janesville, Wisconsin..

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The exodus of experienced professionals is not a minor blip on the workplace screen but something that must be considered seriously.

Patrick Ibarra, Phoenix, Arizona..

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[Human Resources: What's Your Plan?*](#)

If you don't have one for your local government, read this article.

Dave Fountaine, Hamburg, New York..

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[Ethics](#)

The High Price of Gifts

[On Retirement](#)

Scholarship Fund

[Profile](#)

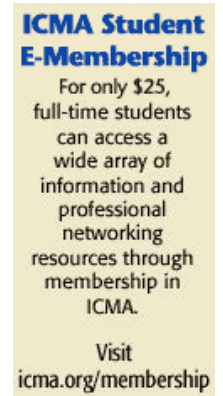
Jim Palenick, Rio Rancho, New Mexico

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PM MAGAZINE

COVER STORY

Wanted: Language and Cultural Competence

by Elizabeth Kellar

What second language do 23 percent of the public school children speak in Beverly Hills, California? If you answered, "Farsi," you would get this question right on a future quiz show!

Increasingly, city and county governments are making a quiet investment to gain a better understanding of the cultural differences among their residents. The city of Beverly Hills found that the Persian population who had settled in the community had a low trust in government, a limited tradition of voting, and seldom participated in public hearings. Many of these new residents also feared assimilation. It was common for multiple generations to live under one roof; traditions for women were different from American ways. Unfortunately, domestic violence was an issue, too.

When a Persian American was elected to the city council for the first time in Beverly Hills' history, he spearheaded outreach efforts to this community of recent immigrants. The city's Human Relations Commission began a cultural awareness effort that included showing pictures of the communities and the housing that they had left behind.

Some city staff could speak Farsi and interpret; others familiarized themselves with the customs of this population. Instead of waiting for their Farsi-speaking residents to come to a city council meeting, city staff members went to the synagogues where many of the immigrants worship. There, it was possible to hold conversations, share important information, and establish relationships.

We can position our communities to be more globally competitive and prepared by encouraging our employees to develop language skills and by supporting language educational programs for children and adults. Did you know that 2005 is the Year of Foreign Languages?

Think and Speak Globally

Local governments have learned to think globally in a world that brings international opportunities and challenges to their doorsteps. They know that successful economic development strategies require more sophistication than ever to attract and retain businesses that have global markets. Likewise, homeland security issues often involve cross-border cooperation, including mutual aid agreements and intelligence sharing.

As Dr. David S.C. Chu, U.S. Undersecretary of Defense, said in his opening remarks at the first National Language Conference in June 2004, we need a "permanent change in our approach to the peoples and cultures of the rest of the world . . . our need to understand the world is a prime national security concern.

"National security concerns have taken us from the streets of Manhattan to the mountains of Afghanistan and to the resort cities of Bali. Our economy has brought workers here to America and sent jobs to 100 countries around the world. Our health is affected by conditions and events in China, Britain, Africa, and South America. Criminal cartels and corrupt officials hundreds of miles beyond our borders have an immediate impact on our streets, in our schools, and our homes. Within one generation, we have become integrated into the world as never before."

Security and Safety Issues

While all local governments have security issues, border communities have special challenges. Consider Laredo, Texas, the largest land port in the United States for people and goods arriving from Central and South America. Every day, 10,000 trucks bring parts and supplies across the border for GM, Ford, and Chrysler, and 30,000 people cross its four bridges, a process that takes one and one-half hours on a normal day and two hours when Code Orange is in effect.

When the temperature reaches 105 degrees outdoors, government officials don't just worry about security—they also worry about the health of the people waiting in line, especially if they lack sufficient water.

Laredo is a booming city, having doubled its population in the past 10 years, from 100,000 to more than 200,000. Old Laredo, its sister city across the border in Mexico, has a population of 600,000. Laredo Fire Chief Luis Sosa is well aware of the strategic importance of his gateway city and also of how reliant he is on his colleagues across the border. If he has a serious emergency, the closest support from any U.S. locality, state government, or federal government agency is 150 miles away. Laredo knows it cannot wait for the U.S. Cavalry to arrive, so it has built relationships with Old Laredo across the border. Laredo sees its bilingual staff as a critical asset.

2005: The Year of Languages

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is spearheading a year-long celebration of foreign languages from the elementary school level to postsecondary education.

Through community and national events, the initiative seeks to focus attention on the academic, social, and economic benefits of studying other languages and cultures from around the world. The goal is to advance the concept that every American should develop proficiency not only in English but in other languages as well.

While educators are taking the lead in promoting the importance of understanding the diverse heritages, cultures, and literature that make up American life, government officials are encouraged to participate in the celebrations and public awareness efforts. For more information, visit the Web site at www.actfl.org.

The mutual aid agreement between Laredo and Old Laredo includes an understanding of hazardous-materials responses and SWAT tactics. Chief Sosa notes that, with three or four bomb threats each month, the two border cities have learned to work together seamlessly.

He explains that Laredo has translated all of its fire academy requirements into "street Spanish," which is geared to the education levels of the first responders, many of whom do not have a high school education. The translations have been done by Laredo staff, none of whom received extra compensation for this work.

Because Laredo has a staff who enjoy sharing knowledge and user-friendly Spanish-language materials, staff members have trained their counterparts in other parts of Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Panama. Their expenses have often been paid by the host country, although they also have sought grants from the donor community. Because 90 percent of Laredo's population is Hispanic, many of them third-generation immigrants, the city has a Spanish-English Web site (www.cityoflaredo.com).

Multicultural Reality Can Challenge Small Communities

Manchester, New Hampshire, is home to 8 percent of the state's immigrants and 80 percent of the children enrolled in English-as-a-second-language classes. You will find a significant population of Russian immigrants in West Hollywood, California, and Afghanis have settled in Fremont, California. But when some 1,200 Somalis arrived in Lewiston, Maine, over an 18-month period, the city was at first overwhelmed.

A community of 36,000, Lewiston made national news when then-Mayor Laurier Raymond, Jr., wrote an open letter asking local Somali residents to "communicate with out-of-state Somalis and discourage them from considering Lewiston as a destination."¹ As Assistant City Administrator Phil Nadeau recounts in a study of the rapid immigration into Lewiston, citizen concerns about the costs of settling the new immigrants prompted the mayor to write the letter. The new immigrants had limited English-speaking skills and had different cultural, social, and religious practices from others in the community. There had been only 700 minority residents in Lewiston in 1990.

Although the mayor's letter sought only to slow down the relocation effort so the city could catch up with the needs of new residents, it sparked an international controversy. Amid the unwelcome attention came a decision by a white supremacist group to hold a public meeting in Lewiston. Nadeau notes that "what was largely a local matter evolved into a national policy debate on general immigration and refugee resettlement."²

Lewiston got a crash course in becoming a global community and had to take it under the glare of national and international media. In the beginning, it found help from the nearby city of Portland, which also has a significant Somali immigrant population; the state of Maine was not equipped to offer assistance.

Lewiston city officials quickly focused on improvements in social service programs, housing, employment training, language education, and health services. They hired a Somali staff member to help interpret and manage social services cases. The Portland Department of Health and Human Services and Catholic Charities Maine also offered critical expertise and free training to Lewiston staff.

Finally, Nadeau and Sue Charron, director of social services, decided to produce a Limited English Proficiency (LEP) manual "to instruct city employees on how to work with linguistically challenged people and how to use the AT&T Language Service when local interpreters were not available."³

In time, the cities of Lewiston and Portland teamed together to form the Portland-Lewiston Refugee Collaborative and were successful in securing grant funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee

Resettlement (DHHS/ ORR) with which to manage some 900 immigrant cases in 18 months. The cities in the collaborative quickly overcame many administrative, budgetary, policy, and political barriers to work together effectively.

Lewiston also invited the U.S. Department of Justice to assist the community in October 2002, a move that resulted in aggressive monitoring of nondiscrimination policies and compliance training. When Nadeau describes the training and programs as legitimate and necessary costs, he notes that compliance costs are usually budgeted incrementally. This was not an option in Lewiston because of the unusual circumstances.

There have been numerous positive developments since Lewiston has had more time to absorb and assist its new immigrant population. Nadeau describes a more international feel and flavor to downtown Lewiston, with the addition of a Somali mosque, two Halaal general stores, and a new Somali restaurant.

The state government has become more focused on immigrant and refugee issues, and the cities of Lewiston and Portland have continued to work together on support programs such as an employment network. The Lewiston city government now is better prepared to help individuals who are hearing- or speech-impaired or who do not speak English. Although city staff still do not have the language skills, Nadeau says the cultural training has made them more effective.

Strengthening Cultural Competence

If you want to understand another culture, the best way to do so is to live and work in that culture. ICMA has organized city-to-city and county-to-county partnerships for a number of years, pairing a community from a developing country with one from the United States or another developed country. The professional staffs from the United States are reimbursed for travel and expenses from donor agencies, which allows American staff members to make multiple visits and to assist their partner communities over a period of one to three years.

Working with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other international agencies, the partnerships allow local officials to address common problems, drawing on the resources of their U.S. counterparts to find solutions. Many of the partnerships focus on developing the economic potential of a city in a developing country in a way that protects and improves environmental conditions.

Once the official assignment has been completed the relationships may continue for years. Those who have participated in the partnerships say that the experiences helped them grow and gave them a new appreciation of the challenges that others face.

In an interview with Elizabeth Nelson, reporter for the Charlottesville, Virginia, Daily Progress, conducted on August 8, 2003, Pleven, Bulgaria, Mayor Nayden Zelenogorski said that "any country with as many applicants for citizenship as the United States must be doing something right." Charlottesville, Virginia, City Manager Gary O'Connell said that he gained a new perspective on local history and the role of a city council in representing its constituents when he thought about the issues from another country's point of view.

O'Connell added that visiting Pleven and seeing the disrepair in streets, sidewalks, and buildings also reminded him of the need to keep up with maintenance.

Recognizing the importance of cultural competence, ICMA is launching a new, Web-based international training program designed to introduce city and county managers to the requirements of international consulting work. The courses will be offered in a series, with an introductory course providing an overview of international work, followed by more in-depth courses for those who want to strengthen their ability to work overseas.

Lost Without Translations

Languages are the front door to another culture, and many local governments are recognizing this fact. The Salinas, California, Police Department is 50 percent bilingual; the rest of the officers take a "survival Spanish" course from an instructor in Santa Clara County. There is a skilled translator at every city council meeting.

Salinas City Manager David Mora took a Spanish immersion class in Costa Rica to improve his language skills. Like many Americans who have assimilated, his generation did not grow up with the notion that bilingual skills were important. Perhaps, this will change.

While the United States has not made progress in promoting multiple language skills in its educational programs, the demand for cultural competence and language skills is growing in government and industry. Since many U.S. communities have populations of immigrants who have retained their language skills, these immigrants, part of a heritage community, may be one pool that can help bridge the gap.

When ICMA was asked to recruit city officials to assist in reconstruction and democracy efforts in Iraq, Cameron Berkuti, an Iraqi-American public works director from Mesa, California, applied. He took a leave of absence and is still working in Kirkuk, where his bilingual skills have been invaluable.

In the meantime, as cities and counties look for ways to communicate with residents speaking 40 to 50 different languages, they use translation services, rely on employee volunteers, or recruit and train employees in needed languages.

In Leesburg, Virginia, one employee offered free language instruction to city staff during lunch. With the assistance of a software program, Oakland, California, is composing a computer-based dictionary with multiple language capability to reduce the amount of time required of translators to produce ballots and other legal documents in the required languages.

National Language Conference

The U.S. Department of Defense and the Center for the Advanced Study of Language convened the first National Language Conference in 2004 to bring together leaders of federal, state, and local governments, industry, international language experts, academia, and language researchers to discuss and lay the foundation for a strategic approach to meeting the nation's language needs in the 21st century. These leaders discussed the language skills needed to:

- Maintain the United States as a secure nation and world leader.
- Ensure cohesiveness, stability, wellness, and economic standing of communities.
- Sustain the economic posture of the United States.

With a goal to move toward a language-competent nation, the conference addressed best practices to recruit, train, and retain personnel with language skills, partnerships with academia and associations, international school system models, and proposals for changes in the U.S. education system.

Hiring and developing talent is a critical strategy to meet community needs. As Sheryl Sculley, assistant city manager of Phoenix, Arizona, says, "All factors being equal, we will hire the person with competency in a second language." Phoenix also offers premium pay to employees who gain certification in a second language. To make it more convenient for employees to gain language skills, Phoenix contracts with a county agency for language training services in 25 languages.

A Critical Leadership Skill

Cultural competence is a critical leadership skill, and there are numerous ways in which the local government management profession can develop it. Gaining overseas experience and learning languages are clearly helpful. Communities can become more globally competitive and prepared by encouraging their employees to develop language skills and supporting language educational programs for children and adults. Did you know that 2005 is the Year of Foreign Languages? The momentum for change is building.

Ambassador W. Robert Pearson, director general of the U.S. Foreign Service and director of human resources for the U.S. Department of State, spoke of the challenges facing the Foreign Service at the National Language Conference. He used a Chinese aphorism, "Shou zhu dai tu," which means "Sit by the stump and wait for the rabbit," to remind the audience that we should not rely on luck to develop the workforce of the future.

"We need people with sound judgment and developed character so that they can do the right thing in an emergency overseas . . . and among them we want people with very strong language skills."

He could have been talking about the next generation of city and county managers!

¹Nadeau, Phil, "The Somalis of Lewiston: Community Impacts of Rapid Immigrant Movement into a Small, Homogeneous Maine City," published by the University of Southern Maine in an Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service Capstone Report (October 20, 2003), p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, p. 4.

³*Ibid.*, p. 19.

Elizabeth Kellar is deputy executive director of the International City/County Management Association (ekellar@icma.org), Washington, D.C. This article is adapted from a presentation given at the National Language Conference on June 22, 2004. The conference was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Center for Advanced Study of Languages.

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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2005 · VOLUME 87 · NUMBER 1

DEPARTMENTS

Ethics Inquiries

The High Price of Gifts

How much is a reputation worth? What value do we place on the public's trust? When we have answered these two questions, it becomes easier to explain why we are unable to accept certain gifts.

Item: Kansas City, Missouri's city manager, Wayne Cauthen, took action last year to tighten city policies and practices regarding gifts. One concern he addressed dealt with the solicitation of gifts by the city's convention and entertainment centers department for door prizes for the department's holiday party. The city manager was concerned that there might be an appearance of favoritism for vendors and contractors that provided gifts or gratuities. "It is important that our citizens and contractors are assured that city employees conduct themselves in accordance with the highest standards in every aspect of their duties and responsibilities," he noted.

In making this announcement, Cauthen also announced the following actions:

1. City ethics training will specifically address the issue of gifts; the solicitation of gifts/prizes by the city and its employees; what constitutes solicitation; and when, if ever, and under what circumstances, such solicitation may be acceptable.
2. Every two years, city employees will be required to certify that they have reviewed and understand the city's ethics policies and are aware of the ethics hotline and other means of reporting suspected violations of ethical conduct.
3. Standard contract language will include a statement requesting vendors to report to the internal auditor any suspected improper conduct by city employees or representatives.
4. Departments will be encouraged to review with the Kansas City Committee on Administrative Service Ethics any issue or proposed action that could be perceived as a potential violation of ethical standards.
5. Information in the city's Human Resources Policy Manual regarding the solicitation of gifts will be reviewed and clarified.

Item: Sacramento, California's parks department created a 501(c)(3) entity to solicit particular gifts and to accept designated and undesignated contributions. "Gifts To Share, Inc., is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supporting the city of Sacramento's park, recreation, cultural, educational, and neighborhood improvement programs and facilities, and those of its partners."

The organization, which has evolved into a funder of competitive start-up grants for neighborhood groups, is a fiscal sponsor to community groups that need an official nonprofit to collect funds for their activities that include the city. Visit the Web site at www.giftstoshare.org.

Item: The city of White Bear Lake, Minnesota, has a formal policy that disallows most gifts and gratuities to employees and officials. Gifts to the city are handled on a case-by-case basis. Gifts from developers or persons/firms holding more than two acres of land within the city are refused in all cases. Other offers to contribute are considered by the city council at regular open meetings, and before they are accepted, a determination of public benefit is made.

Typical gifts accepted include public safety equipment, cash donations to a park fund, artwork, a clock tower, parkland, and cash for specific programs (e.g., a food shelf and youth counseling). Gifts that have conditions attached or significant ongoing maintenance costs generally are respectfully declined.

Item: The city of Phoenix, Arizona, has a policy stating that no city employee shall accept any gift, service, or favor that would lead toward favoritism or the appearance of favoritism in any way. Employees are instructed to "refuse any gifts or favors which may reasonably be interpreted to be offered to influence a municipal decision." They must be wary of accepting gifts from individuals doing business with the city or whose financial interests are affected by city action.

The policy advises employees that, "while you are the first to decide whether to accept any gift, you must recognize that others will decide if there is 'the appearance of favoritism' for your having accepted a gift." The policy specially outlines which gifts an employee must declare if accepted, such as Cardinals football tickets, Fiesta Bowl tickets, seats for NCAA Final Four games, and admission to symphony hall performances.

Item: A newly hired city manager was offered a full country club membership (value of \$25,000) shortly after he was appointed. ICMA's Committee on Professional Conduct advised him not to accept the gift, as it creates an image that the city manager is receiving a favor. Some local governments offer membership in clubs as part of an employment package, a better way to provide such compensation.

The ICMA Code of Ethics' guideline on gifts reads: "Members should not directly or indirectly solicit any gift or accept or receive any gift, whether it be money, services, a loan, travel, entertainment, hospitality, a promise, or any other form-under the following circumstances: (1) it could be reasonably inferred or expected that the gift was intended to influence them in the performance of their official duties; or (2) the gift was intended to serve as a reward for any official action on their part."

Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The inquiries and advice are reviewed by the Committee on Professional Conduct, the ethics committee of the ICMA Executive Board. Some of the inquiries are revised and published as a regular feature in *PM*, to give guidance to members in the big and little ethical decisions they make daily. If you have a question about your obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics, call Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611, e-mail, ekellar@icma.org or Martha Perego at 202/962-3668, e-mail, mperego@icma.org.

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DEPARTMENTS

On Retirement

Scholarship Fund

In the United States, we are fortunate to have public employees who are dedicated to making our communities enjoyable and safe places to live. While in the course of performing their duties, however, firefighters, police officers, and other public safety workers face great risks to their safety. All too often, they make the ultimate sacrifice in protecting us.

While we cannot ease the pain felt by their families and friends, we can help the survivors rebuild their lives. The Vantagepoint Public Employee Memorial Scholarship Fund is a public charity founded in 2001 by the ICMA Retirement Corporation (ICMA-RC) to honor the sacrifice of public sector employees who have paid the highest possible price for their service.

The Vantagepoint Memorial Scholarship Fund offers educational scholarships to surviving family members of firefighters, police officers, and all nonuniformed local and state government employees who have tragically perished while doing their jobs. These scholarships help survivors pursue college and vocational-school opportunities. Since its inception, the fund has provided 60 students with scholarships worth more than \$250,000.

For the 2005-2006 school year, the board of directors of the Vantagepoint Memorial Scholarship Fund has set aside \$95,000 for awards. Survivors of all public sector employees, both emergency and nonemergency personnel, who have died in the line of duty are eligible. Applications are currently being accepted, and the children and spouses of police, fire, and other public sector employees are encouraged to apply.

If you are aware of a family whose loved one has paid the ultimate sacrifice, let them know that applications for the 2005-2006 scholarships are now being accepted. Copies of the application can be obtained by calling Scholarship America, the national nonprofit educational support organization that the Vantagepoint Memorial Scholarship Fund has retained to assist in administering the program. The phone number is 1-507/931-1682. Information can also be found online at www.vantagescholar.org.

Our public employees give so much to their communities. This is an opportunity to give something back to the survivors of our firefighters, police officers, and other public employees who died in service to us.

—Joan McCallen
President, Vantagepoint Memorial Scholarship Fund and CEO and President
ICMA Retirement Corporation
Washington, D.C.

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He's the City of Vision's Visionary

City Administrator Jim Palenick isn't dreaming of the future. He is trying to position Rio Rancho, New Mexico, for its arrival.

For the past year, Palenick has worked to position Rio Rancho for what he says are dramatic and dynamic changes to come in the City of Vision. "We have reached critical mass," Palenick said. "I have had the distinct pleasure of being able to come at a great time."

In July 2003, city councilors chose Palenick from a long list of applicants to run the city. At the time, Palenick was working as a private consultant. He went to work immediately, putting together a comprehensive economic development policy for the city.



Jim Palenick is city administrator of [Rio Rancho, New Mexico](#).

That policy, originally sketched out in longhand on legal pads, was adopted by the council [in 2004]. It lays out a number of city initiatives, including a future downtown starting at the intersection of Unser and King streets.

"We can become a very special place if we care about how we develop our surroundings in both the natural and built environment," Palenick said. The council approved a land trade with AMREP earlier this week that Palenick hopes will lead to the city's acquiring about 150 acres at King and Unser from the New Mexico State Land Office.

Rio Rancho's built environment will soon include a new city hall, a library approved by voters [in 2004], and a multipurpose event center. Palenick said residents should expect announcements about a new city hall and an events center to come sooner, rather than later-announcements he expects will set off a chain of events, including the construction of a first-class hotel and conference center, as well as restaurants and retail development.

"People are absolutely recognizing the potential that is here, and because of that, in the next five years incredibly dramatic changes will occur," he said.

The economic development policy also emphasizes how the city can influence the architecture chosen by private firms. Palenick said that part of receiving tax incentives from the city would include meeting specific building requirements, which would be developed by the community. "If someone is asking for the benefits, they have to be willing to fit themselves within the built environment," Palenick said.

These initiatives add up to what Palenick sees as livability, or quality-of-life, issues. "It's quality over quantity," he said. "If you stress the quality, you are going to get the quantity." Palenick said that he knew the city was growing when he took the job but didn't expect the growth to be so pronounced. The city recently estimated that its population now exceeds 60,000. It is issuing about 2,000 housing permits a year, a number that it expects will increase.

"I think everybody knows Rio Rancho is a growth community, but all of us are starting to understand the depth and magnitude of what that means," he said. "It isn't just residential; it's going to rapidly become a lot of commercial, civic, industrial, and other types of growth.

"There are huge amounts of dollars in this community that are being spent on a daily basis by people, and unfortunately, most of that takes place outside of here," Palenick said. "We can change that, and we will change that."

—Joshua Akers, Staff Writer, *Rio Rancho Journal*, Rio Rancho, New Mexico

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