

Serving Diverse Communities – Cultural Competency

by **Abraham David Benavides and Julie C. T. Hernández**

Ethnic, racial, and cultural differences exist in all aspects of society, but nowhere are they more clearly evident than in our local communities. As predicted by demographers, our communities are changing. Communities that were expected to increase in minority and immigrant populations have done so. Others that did not expect such an impact have still been affected by the global economy. Local government officials are learning to adapt to culturally and linguistically different populations. Many jurisdictions have been proactive in their response to the needs of these communities, while others are still seeking ways to proceed.

Experience has shown that successful governments are responsive to residents. Thus, most cities and counties make an effort to know their people and respond to their needs. As communities change, government officials will need to continually modify their service delivery practices to be supportive of the groups within their city limits. Sometimes adjustments in managerial practices are necessary; other times adding to or adjusting existing programs is important.

This is the second of two articles designed to address best practices for serving diverse communities. In a June 2007 *PM* article, “Serving Diverse Communities—Best Practices,” three best practices case studies (one in Woodburn, Oregon, and two in Stockton, California) and an introduction to a recently

completed best practices study were presented, along with key learnings from the implementation of these best practices. In this article, a more in-depth look at the findings from the International Hispanic Network's (IHN) best practices study, "Municipal Best Practices for the Hispanic Community Survey," is presented.

Interest in an article on the topic of best practices for serving diverse communities was generated by a telephone coaching panel called "Serving Diverse Communities—Best Practices" held in October 2006, which was organized by Cal-ICMA's Preparing the Next Generation Committee (cochaired by Frank Benest, city manager, Palo Alto, California, and Tim O'Donnell, city manager, Brea, California).

The coaching panel was moderated by Don Maruska of Don Maruska & Company, who also serves as director of the Cal-ICMA coaching program. One of the panelists was Dr. Abraham David Benavides, a coauthor of this article, who reported on the IHN's recently completed best practices study.

IHN BEST PRACTICES STUDY

During the past few years, there has been an increase in the foreign-born population of the United States. From budding immigrant populations in South Carolina and Arkansas, to continued growth in California and Texas, minorities make up an increasing share of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Recent social and political events show that Hispanics in the United States are making positive strides but are also facing challenging problems.

The Hispanic' population is the largest minority group in the country (some 42.7 million), is growing faster than any other group, and comprises about 14.7 percent of the U.S. population (according to 2006 U.S. census updates). Hispanic buying power will soon reach \$100 billion, or 10 percent of the nation's buying power. Hispanics are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. labor force.

Data used in this article come from the "Municipal Best Practices for the Hispanic Community Survey," which was commissioned by the IHN to establish current best practices in local governments that serve the Hispanic community. The study was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

IHN is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to encourage professional excellence among Hispanic local government administrators; improve the management of local government; provide unique resources to Hispanic local government executives and public managers; and advance the goals of

The success of local government often is based on our ability to adapt. One trend currently challenging local government is dealing appropriately with the rapidly changing demographics of our communities.

professional, effective, and ethical local government administration.

The survey was conducted during January and February 2005, and it was sent to professional city managers who manage cities in all 50 states with Hispanic populations of at least 12 percent. The survey received a 31 percent response rate, with responses from 31 states.

The best practices presented in this article show the responsiveness of local officials to the needs of their Hispanic communities. Although these best practices consider only one ethnic group, Hispanics, the model of responsiveness at the local government level is one that may be valuable for accommodating the cultural

differences of residents of any race or ethnicity.

SIX BEST PRACTICES

From the many case studies provided by survey respondents, six best practices categories emerged: cultural competency, translation and interpretation services, membership on boards and commissions, specialized policing services, specialized immigrant services, and day-labor sites.

Cultural competency. Local governments have traditionally been responsible for law enforcement, fire protection, public works, and other basic services. As the needs and desires of communities have grown, this list has expanded to include libraries, museums, civic centers, and recreational facilities. More recently, cities have added services to help the poor and disadvantaged and those of differing cultures.

Some think of cultural competency as affirmative action, multiculturalism, diversity training, equal employment opportunity, political correctness, or other methods and laws used to increase diversity in organizations. However, it is a much broader concept that begins with the dominant culture becoming self-aware of its own customs and then being responsive to and understanding of the cultural differences of other people within a system.

Basically, it is a "respect for and understanding of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, their histories, traditions, beliefs, and value system in the provision and delivery of services. In practice, cultural competent public administration emphasizes the capacity of public organizations and their employees to effectively provide services that reflect the different cultural influences of their constituents or clients."²² In other words, cultural competency converts the knowledge gained about groups and individuals into policies and procedures that result in practices that increase the quality of the services to produce better outcomes.

The Seattle police department, for example, informed its officers that in many Latin American societies it is the custom for the person being pulled over for a traffic violation to get out of the vehicle and walk back to the patrol car. This understanding, through training, has helped many officers avoid misinterpreting the actions of those being pulled over.

A recent study by IHN has shown how some local governments are responding to the Hispanic community with greater cultural competency. With the Hispanic population on the rise in nearly every community in the United States, public services must respond to and reflect the changing needs of these communities. A number of cities reported building on the traditions of second- and third-generation Hispanics to provide meaningful services to all Hispanics.

By collaborating and seeking participation from Hispanics who have been in the United States for years, localities have been able to customize programs that help new Hispanic immigrants as well as those who have been U.S. residents for decades.

Translation and interpretation services. For years, cities and counties have been providing informal interpretation and translation services: A Spanish-speaking staff member often helps a manager or administrator with a specific individual or community issue. Today, however, circumstances have changed, and 85 percent of respondents reported that their cities provide interpretation services for courts, police, city council, hospitals, and other government meetings.

For example, of the 16,000 babies born at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas, in 2005, 14,000 were born to mothers who did not speak English. Because of the increase in non-English-speaking patients, the hospital has expanded its recruitment to include Spanish-speaking nurses and has instituted a program of special interpreters to facilitate communication.

Seventy-six percent of respondents stated that brochures, calendars, agendas, and other official materials are translated into Spanish and disseminated in health clinics, city housing offices, parks and recreation facilities, and churches. Some cities have attempted the innovation of giving additional compensation or incentive pay to employees who are bilingual. Sixty cities (37 percent) are currently participating in such programs.

Participation on boards and committees. Eighty-seven percent of cities have Hispanic residents who serve on

Those communities that appear to be successful have made the attempt to reach out and tailor programs, with significant input from the community, to the specific needs of their residents.

advisory councils, boards, committees, and commissions. As Hispanics participate in the local government process, their voices and concerns convey the needs in their neighborhoods. This exchange of views and participation will increase the understanding of the city toward the community and broaden the community's understanding of local government.

Policing services. A primary task in any police service is to gain the trust and confidence of those being served. A principal part of gaining this trust is through community outreach. Being able to speak the language and communicate with residents is fundamental to gaining trust.

Survey respondents were asked to provide data on the number of police officers in their organizations who

speak Spanish. Aggregating responses showed that 71 percent of police officers in responding organizations do not speak Spanish. Language barriers will continue to be a stumbling block to appropriate policing in many communities. An indication that police departments have already recognized the need for language diversity is evident in their practice of dispatching officers fluent in the language when other officers request assistance.

Respondents indicated that a minimal language barrier existed between Hispanics and the court system. To mitigate these barriers, many cities have either hired or contracted for interpretation and translation services.

Immigrant services. Immigrants from all countries have made an enormous impact on the United States. In fact, one of the many strengths of the United States is its diversity. At the local level, a variety of services and levels of assistance are offered by cities to both legal and illegal immigrants.

Nevertheless, immigrant services are not as prevalent as one would expect. A total of 40 percent of respondents reported that they do not offer services to immigrants, while only 36 percent said they offer some type of transition programs, and 7 of the respondents (4.3 percent) indicated that they did not know whether they offer such services.

Recently, Indianapolis, Indiana, won a cultural diversity award from the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials of the National League of Cities for the city's Natural Helpers program, part of its Immigrant Welcome Center. The program offers one-on-one support services for new immigrants. The natural helpers are trained neighborhood volunteers who link new immigrants to health services, social services, and transportation.

Day-labor sites. A day-labor site is a centralized location—official or informal—where day laborers gather to seek employment and where employers come to arrange for services. Most

employment contracts are oral and unofficial and last for eight hours or less, as most employees are undocumented immigrants. The informal system meets the needs of both employees and employers. According to the survey results, 30 percent of the cities indicated that they had a day-labor site. However, the majority (55 percent) indicated that they did not. Case studies of several types of day-labor sites will be published in a *PM* article later this year.

CASE EXAMPLES

The best practices case studies included here are examples of some local governments' efforts to deliver quality services to the Hispanic community. Those communities that appear to be successful have made the attempt to reach out and tailor programs, with significant input from the community, to the specific needs of their residents.

The common theme in all of these services is that the local government took time to find out what was needed and included the community in its service delivery design. Participation from the Hispanic community was found to be key in delivering a service that could ultimately qualify as a best practice.

Of the 43 cities that submitted a program to be considered as a best practice, 14 met all the criteria that would define them as a genuine best practice. These programs not only had a significant impact on the Hispanic community but also met the other criteria: successful over a period of time, innovative or groundbreaking, measurable results, consequential, and replicable. Sixteen of the 43 programs were classified as emerging best practices programs. In other words, they met many of the criteria, but fell short in one or two of the categories. With minor adjustments, in time these programs too can prove to be best practices. For more information on the best practices programs that were identified by the IHN survey, visit the Web site at www.internationalhispanicnetwork.org.

Hispanic Orientation and Education Program, Alexandria, Virginia.

The two primary components of the Hispanic Orientation and Education Program (HOEP) are English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction and the provision of gradual and nonthreatening acculturation assistance to Hispanics. Workshops and orientations are offered in the topics of citizenship, community resources, employment, health, domestic violence, and taxes.

Goals of the program are to facilitate the movement of Alexandria's Hispanic residents into the American

Cultural competency is a much broader concept that begins with the dominant culture becoming self-aware of its own customs and then being responsive to and understanding of the cultural differences of other people within a system.

mainstream through sensitive acculturation and self-sufficiency. One of the elements that has made the program successful is its volunteer development. Each year, 25 to 35 volunteers are trained to understand and recognize the cultural, social, and economic differences of their students and customers.

The participation of the volunteers in HOEP has a dual purpose: volunteers serve as ESL teachers and role models, and they acquire firsthand knowledge and understanding of the Hispanic community. HOEP has striven to build bridges between ethnic groups and has successfully formed coalitions with grassroots organizations and established credibility with-

in the Hispanic community as well as with the greater community.

City Council Meetings Translated into Spanish, Santa Barbara, California.

In the city of Santa Barbara, California, city council meetings are simultaneously translated into Spanish. Residents can listen to the proceedings in real time in English or Spanish. Both English and Spanish versions also are rebroadcast on the city television channel.

In the council chamber, earphones are available before and during the council meetings so individuals whose first language is Spanish can plug them in and hear the translation. The goal of the program is to allow Spanish-speaking residents the same access to government and to council meetings as English-speaking residents.

The fact that translation is simultaneous affords everyone access with dignity and has been a major factor in the program's success. The whole community has responded with general satisfaction, and the service has been especially successful in the Spanish-speaking community. (In fact, during the first 50 years of Santa Barbara's existence as a city, all business was conducted in Spanish.)

Latino Advisory Council/Police Community Liaison, Seattle, Washington.

The Latino advisory council was organized to meet with the Seattle police for the purpose of bridging the communication gap between the police department and the Hispanic community. The advisory council discusses concerns, issues, recommendations, needs, perspectives, and insights from the Hispanic communities. This feedback goes directly to the police department and has had an impact on the community policing model used by the Seattle police department.

The Latino liaison officer is a full-time staff person who reports directly to a deputy chief. A major goal of the program is to help build relationships between the Seattle police department

Resources

1. For more information on the coaching program services and programs offered by Cal-ICMA's Preparing the Next Generation Committee, visit the Web site at www.cal-icma.org.
2. For a podcast of the October 2006 "Serving Diverse Communities—Best Practices" and prior telephone coaching sessions, and for a listing of the 2007 telephone coaching program schedule, visit www.cal-icma.org/coaching.
3. For copies of PowerPoint® presentations, video clips, news articles, and contact information from the October 2006 telephone coaching session "Serving Diverse Communities—Best Practices," visit www.cal-icma.org/coaching and search under the "Telephone Panels" tab.
4. Tools are available to support local government best practices efforts to serve diverse communities through these professional organizations:
 - International City/County Management Association (ICMA) at www.icma.org.
 - International Hispanic Network (IHN) at www.internationalhispanicnetwork.org.
 - National Forum for Black Public Administrators (NFBPA) at www.nfbpa.org.
 - California Asian Public Administrators Network and Caucus of Elected Asians (CA-PANACEA) at (e-mail) achan@ci.sunnyvale.ca.us.

and the Latino communities. The advisory council and the Latino liaison officer work together to promote awareness, partnerships, community involvement, and training. This collaboration shows the need for social service programs that focus on gang prevention, intervention, and recovery services. The liaison also works closely with the Mexican and Peruvian consulates because a high proportion of Seattle's immigrant population is from these countries.

Diversity Language Skill Program, Reno, Nevada. Reno, Nevada, provides instruction in practical Spanish language skills to any interested city employee. Under the guidance of International Professional Development Services (IPDS), a local business whose primary emphasis is Spanish-language skills training and development, and the Truckee Meadows Community College, city employees are able to hone their Spanish language skills in twice-a-month workshops, regardless of their level of proficiency. Employees' Spanish-language skills are matched with one of three groups: beginning, intermediate, or advanced. Only those employees who have been

certified as having an advanced proficiency in Spanish are permitted to translate written materials.

The goal of this program is to equip employees at all levels with language skills sufficient to serve the city's diverse residents. The success of the program can be credited to participating employees who are committed to expanding the city's ability to meet the needs of the Spanish-speaking residents and enhancing its customer service for all residents.

The city of Reno has recently expanded its Spanish-language program to include the "Spanish in Brief" program for the police department. These trainings are short 15- to 20-minute lessons held in the morning and afternoon briefings on a weekly basis. The focus is on improved customer service and safety in the field.

Learning activities include alphabet, short phrases, spelling, and pronunciation. Specific scenarios are used to develop Spanish language skills for traffic stops, personal contact on the street, assistance with reporting a crime, and connecting to the city's "Language Service Line."

Employees who pass a language evaluation through the community

college are eligible for bilingual pay incentive.

CONCLUSION

The success of local government often is based on our ability to adapt. One trend currently challenging local government is dealing appropriately with the rapidly changing demographics of our communities. IHN's best practices study, "Municipal Best Practices for the Hispanic Community Survey," identifies best practices that can be used to adapt to the growing Hispanic community. These best practices can also be generalized for use with a variety of diverse communities.

As diversity in the United States continues to increase, it is important that local governments become culturally competent and recognize the unique differences among the various ethnic populations within each local jurisdiction. By doing so, they will become responsive to the needs of the entire community. **PM**

¹In this article, the authors choose to use the term Hispanic instead of Latino or Latina. These interchangeable terms can be used to describe Spanish-surnamed peoples and individuals whose ethnic culture primarily descends from North, Central, and South America (including the Caribbean). Hispanics can be of any race and of many cultures. Neither term, however, completely captures the diversity that exists among these peoples.

²Margo L. Bailey, "Cultural Competency and the Practice of Public Administration," in *Diversity and Public Administration: Theory, Issues, and Perspectives*, ed. Mitchell F. Rice (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), p. 177.

Abraham David Benavides, Ph.D., is assistant professor, Department of Public Administration, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas (benavides@unt.edu). Julie C.T. Hernández is a local government consultant with Management Partners, San Jose, California (jcthernandez@managementpartners.com). A former local government manager, she is a founding member of Cal-ICMA's Preparing the Next Generation Committee and a former president and board member of the International Hispanic Network.