Breaking Down Barriers between Law Enforcement and Immigrants

By Melissa Taylor Bell

Each year, thousands of people emigrate to the United States to start new lives. However, they may not have a clear understanding of American federal, state and local laws. This lack of knowledge, combined with cultural and linguistic differences, can lead to encounters with law enforcement.

Many immigrants, especially those accustomed to corrupt, repressive and violent police forces in their native countries, fear law enforcement officials. Because of cultural and language barriers, police officers have difficulty communicating and persuading new immigrants to report crimes, serve as witnesses, provide information on crimes or become employees of the police department.

As the number of non-English speakers grows, law enforcement officers face increasing language barriers when dealing with suspects and convicted criminals. When a state trooper pulls over someone who does not speak English well, there is always the potential for misunderstanding. The same scenario exists for prison guards who only speak English and convicts with little or no English comprehension.

Addressing Cultural Barriers

Several states and localities are trying to break down the cultural and linguistic barriers. In some cities, nonprofit organizations collaborate with police departments to find alternative communication channels between law enforcement and the various immigrant communities. For example, the Vera Institute of Justice in New York City is organizing working groups with representatives from the city’s immigrant communities and police department officials for a series of forums on topics such as the community’s crime rate, safety, policing needs and concerns, the relationship between the police and the community, and strategies for improving police-community relations.

Community policing programs, which address crime and the fear of crime through problem-solving tactics and police-community partnerships, are also effective. The Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy, for example, involves regular meetings between community residents and police who work in the neighborhood. These meetings, held in places such as church basements and park buildings all over the city, facilitate the exchange of information about public safety and security needs within the community and help diffuse negative perceptions about the police.

Addressing Linguistic Barriers

In addition to addressing cultural concerns, some states and municipalities are teaching law enforcement officers Spanish to break down linguistic barriers. For example, Pennsylvania offers state police officers basic language in Spanish. In Kentucky, police officers receive elementary Spanish instruction during basic training to help them communicate with non-English speakers in situations such as traffic violations. A federally funded enhanced police corps training program in Kentucky provides more intensive training that includes 80 hours of course work and a two-week-long Spanish immersion program in Mexico. A program launched by the California Highway Patrol bridges the language gap by training cadets in basic law enforcement tasks in both languages.

In addition to law enforcement officers on the street, corrections facilities have begun to address the growing challenge of language barriers between non-English speaking inmates and corrections officers. New Mexico requires inmates incarcerated for longer than 18 months but fewer than 10 years to enroll in an educational program, which includes an ESL course in every state prison facility. Inmates participating in various re-entry initiatives are also required to enroll in the program.

In North Carolina, every inmate’s language proficiency is measured by the ESL Oral Assessment test. Inmates who need training in English are placed in one of the 14 prison facilities that offer ESL instruction. The program is mandatory for all qualified inmates, regardless of their nationality. Although ESL classes are not mandatory for qualified inmates in Colorado, the state offers strong incentives for enrolling in educational programs. Inmates with a high school or General Educational Development diploma are eligible for certain jobs at prison facilities, and because the ESL course is a prerequisite for earning those diplomas in prison, the enrollment rate is high despite the program’s voluntary nature.

States also face several other immigration-related issues in the areas of public safety and law enforcement. For instance, states are grappling with issue of drivers’ licenses and identification cards for illegal immigrants. Gang-related violence in some immigrant-dominated areas is on the rise. And state facilities house inmates awaiting deportation with little or no reimbursement from the federal government. To learn more about these issues and state policies and programs to deal with them, download TrendsAlert: Immigration’s Impact on Public Safety and Justice from www.csg.org (keyword: immigration).

Melissa Taylor Bell is the associate director of research at The Council of State Governments.