Hispanic Community Wants Bilingual Police Officers

Aisha Al-Muslim
Latino residents want police to be able to . . .

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Community activists in Hempstead Village are pushing officials to hire more bilingual police officers to better communicate with Spanish-speaking residents.

In the community with a Hispanic population of more than 44 percent, seven of its 127 police officers are fluent in Spanish, while a handful have basic skills in the language, village officials said. About a third of Hempstead residents speak Spanish at home, according to U.S. Census data.

The village of 54,000 residents has one of the highest crime rates on Long Island, according to the state Division of Criminal Justice Services.

“If a person can’t explain what happened, that means that police can’t act,” said Javier Gallardo, senior organizer of the Long Island Civic Participation Project, an advocacy group in Hempstead Village. Police Chief Joseph Wing said he is limited to hiring officers from Nassau County’s list of candidates who pass the police civil service exam. The last test was administered in August 2007 and the list of candidates created in April 2009.

“The biggest barrier is getting Latinos to take the police exam,” said Wing, who added the police department gives priority to candidates who live in the village. “It’s not that I don’t want to hire them [Spanish-speaking officers].”

Currently, the police department utilizes Language Line, a 24-hour translation service, for calls to the precinct, Wing said. When police officers in the field can’t communicate with crime victims or witnesses, they try to find a neighbor, family member or merchant to help them translate, he said.

Salvadoran immigrant Reynaldo López, 64, said he was attacked by three men near his Hempstead Village home almost three years ago. The beating left him blind in his left eye. Two village police officers, who didn’t speak Spanish, responded to a 911 call, but left, thinking he didn’t want to file a complaint, López said.

“There are many [Hispanic] people who don’t report the incidents,” López said in Spanish. The 21-year village resident doesn’t speak English.

The Long Island Civic Participation Project and the Workplace Project, an advocacy group for immigrant workers, are asking village officials to request that the Nassau County Civil Service Commission create a second list for local departments to use to find bilingual officers.

“We would have no problem creating a bilingual position if the department heads requested it,” said Karl Kampe, commission executive director.

Suffolk County for the first time will create a separate list of Spanish-speaking candidates following its police exam tomorrow, said Alan Schneider, Suffolk County Civil Service personnel director. Candidates would need to take a written and spoken Spanish proficiency exam, he said.

“Nassau should follow Suffolk’s example,” Gallardo said.

Members of the Long Island Civic Participation Project: Jose Marinero, left; Reynaldo López, Antonio Torres, Delbys Torres and Pedro Reyes.