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In November of 1991, the Evening Patrol Section of the Arlington County Police Department implemented a new program involving members of our Hispanic community. The program was named the **Bilingual Ride-Along Program**.

#### NEED AND JUSTIFICATION

Arlington County has a burgeoning minority population. Since 1980, the Hispanic population has almost tripled. We now have more than 23,000 Hispanic citizens residing in our community. Approximately one out of every six persons is of Hispanic descent. The Hispanic population is Arlington's largest minority community and has the greatest projected growth rate.

In the early summer of 1991, Washington, D.C., our neighboring jurisdiction, was the site of a three-day confrontation between members of the Hispanic community and the local authorities. The altercation that took place involved burning, looting, vandalism, and the disruption of general order.

One of the elements that acted as a catalyst to the disruption was a lack of sensitivity to the acculturation that minorities coming to this country face. Many times these people feel removed from society and unable to communicate their needs.

Conditions similar to those which contributed to the confrontation in Washington, D.C. were also identified as existing in Arlington County. One of the factors leading to the disruption was the local authorities and the Hispanic community inability to communicate.

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Many members of our Hispanic population only speak the Spanish dialect of their native country. The majority of our existing police force is not bilingual. The Police Department's ability to hire bilingual officers is limited by employment competition with other local jurisdictions and Arlington's two-year college requirement for its officers. Therefore, our officers and Hispanic citizens frequently cannot communicate and must rely on marginal translation assistance by a limited number of officers who have learned Spanish as a second language.

#### OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

The Bilingual Ride-Along Program was designed to accomplish the following objectives:

- \* Enhance police/community relationships and cooperation
- \* Improve the quality of police service
- \* Increase performance efficiency through accurate translation

#### PROGRAM OPERATION

Flyers soliciting bilingual volunteers were distributed to local supermarkets, churches, civic groups, libraries, employment offices and universities. The County's volunteer agency also played a pivotal role in advertising by alerting various segments of the media to this volunteer opportunity.

Prospective participants are screened, selected and supervised by a police supervisor. Volunteers determine the evening hours

they would like to work. Supervisors assign each volunteer to a beat officer. Arlington resident volunteers are picked up at their homes by the officer. Non-resident volunteers are met at the station by the officer.

Volunteers "ride-along" in the cruiser as the officer performs his community policing duties and responds to dispatched calls. The officers are responsible for the safety of the volunteers. As the need for Spanish translation arises, the officer transports the volunteer to the scene. At the end of the ride-along tour, the officer completes an evaluation form citing the performance of the volunteer and documents which incidents the volunteer was involved.

#### STATISTICS AND RESULTS

Since the inception of the program, 25 volunteers have participated. The majority of these individuals have ridden a minimum of four times to date. The total number of volunteer hours donated to the program is in excess of 200.

Some of the everyday concerns volunteers have helped address are directing lost citizens, resolving civil disputes, and providing legal information. A sampling of the types of calls where volunteer contribution has been most significant are noted below:

- \* In the area of domestic violence, the volunteers have assisted in the resolution of family disputes. They have also educated victims

regarding their legal rights and provided resource and referral information.

- \* In working with Spanish speaking victims of sexual assault, volunteers have been instrumental in providing needed emotional support to the victim and in obtaining information vital to the investigation and apprehension of the perpetrator.
- \* On numerous occasions volunteers have provided urgently needed translation skills for medics and emergency room personnel treating victims of medical emergencies.
- \* In the area of traffic accidents, volunteers have been beneficial in assisting the police gather accurate investigative information.

The Bilingual Ride-Along Program is meeting its original objectives. The relationship between Arlington's Hispanic community and the Police Department has been enhanced. The opportunity to work together has resulted in increased understanding and respect on both sides. The opportunity to relate to each other as individuals has helped to negate previously held stereotypes of "foreigners" and "cops". Officers frequently exposed only to the dark side of people now have a more positive balanced insight of this population. Volunteers have more knowledge about the law, the

challenges of community policing, and the person behind the badge.

The program has also improved the quality of service. The officers frustration of not being able to understand what has happened has been greatly reduced. With the assistance of volunteers, officers can now comprehend the needs of our Hispanic citizens and, therefore, provide more appropriate and through assistance. Investigative questioning at the scene is much more comprehensive and officers are better able to document the important elements.

Performance efficiency has also increased. With the service of a volunteer, officers have an immediate aid in the performance of their duties. As they are able to quickly ascertain the nature of the problem, and immediately communicate with those involved, many incidents are more expediently resolved.

The Police Department and the Hispanic population of Arlington County have mutually benefited from the **Bilingual Ride-Along Program**. This singular effort has produced multiple positive outcomes. It is expected that this joint endeavor will become an integral part of Arlington County's ongoing effort to reach out and provide quality services to all of our citizens.