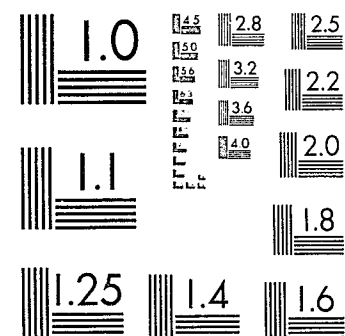


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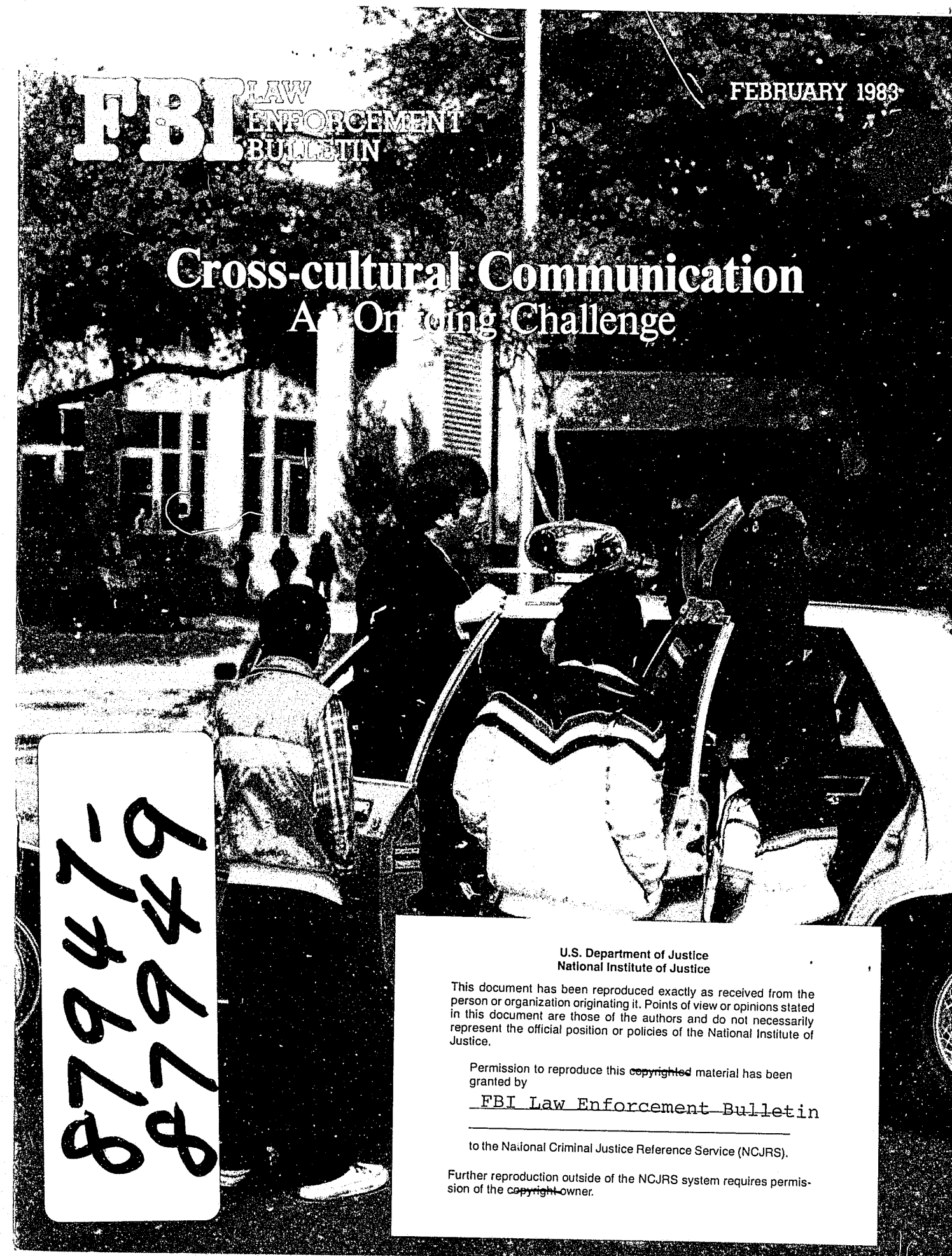
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National Institute of Justice
United States Department of Justice
Washington, D. C. 20531

5-24-83



FBI LAW ENFORCEMENT BULLETIN

FEBRUARY 1983

Cross-cultural Communication An Ongoing Challenge

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FBI LAW ENFORCEMENT BULLETIN

FEBRUARY 1983, VOLUME 52, NUMBER 2

NCJRS

MAR 15 1983

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Federal Bureau of Investigation
United States Department of Justice
Washington, D.C. 20535

William H. Webster, Director

The Attorney General has determined that the publication of this periodical is necessary in the transaction of the public business required by law of the Department of Justice. Use of funds for printing the periodical has been approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Published by the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs.
Roger S. Young, Assistant Director

Editor - Thomas J. Deakin
Assistant Editor - Kathryn E. Sulewski
Art Director - Kevin J. Mulholland
Writer/Editor - Karen McCarron
Production Manager - Jeffrey L. Summers
Reprints - Mary Ellen Drotar



ISSN 0014-5688

USPS 383 310

87947

Police-Community Relations

Cross-cultural Communication An Ongoing Challenge

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Dr. Quintanilla

In a culturally diverse society, law enforcement officials must cope with stress that may be generated when they are challenged by the duty of effectively communicating with others of a different language. Many police departments throughout the Nation now provide classes to help alleviate stress that officers may face both on and off duty.

The Houston Police Department (HPD), for example, has offered its officers inservice training on stress awareness and management for the last 6 years. During the last 5 years, the department has supplemented that inservice training component with an innovative cross-cultural program designed to emphasize cross-communication as a valuable tool. The program begins at the academy, continues as part of inservice training for experienced officers, and offers information that should help cadets and officers deal more effectively with stress in cross-cultural circumstances. Four hours in the first phase of the program include basic information about Hispanic culture and its variations. Cadets learn some of the cultural differences between Anglo-Americans and Hispanics, as well as cultural differences between Hispanic citizens and recent arrivals of other Hispanics to this country. Stress, what causes it, how individuals can recognize it, how it affects people emotionally, physically, psychologically, and most importantly, how it can be dealt with effectively, particularly in cross-cultural circumstances, is discussed.

The approach is one of interaction, not of straight lecture, and students have an opportunity to share information and strategies for coping. Furthermore, based on the premise that understanding cultural differences (particularly if the language is different from one's own) helps one to cope more effectively with stress in cross-cultural circumstances, the class discussion focuses on one culture—the Hispanic.

Emphasis on the Hispanic community is necessitated by the rapidly changing demographic profile of our country. For example, in 1970, according to the U.S. Bureau of Census, there were 9.1 million persons of Hispanic origin in the United States. The number of Hispanics had increased to 11.3 million by 1977 and 14.7 million by 1980. The U.S. Census figures, however, present a conservative picture of the reality of Hispanic growth in this country. Those figures do not include two important components of that growth—those who choose not to identify themselves as Hispanic and undocumented aliens. Therefore, it is estimated that in the 1980's, Hispanics will be the second largest minority in this country due to immigration and birth rate.

Although the largest concentration of persons of Spanish origin up to the early 1960's was in California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, today there are Hispanics in almost every corner of the country. Members of this group, although different in many ways from each other, share a culture and a distinctive way of life. One of the components of that culture—language—presents a barrier that not only prevents effective communication between law enforcement officers and members of the Spanish-speaking



community but also adds stress to an already difficult and dangerous profession.

Houston, the fastest growing city in the United States, is attracting approximately 6,000 people a month; it is estimated that at least 19 percent of these people are of Hispanic descent. Therefore, the second phase of HPD's training program, implemented during inservice training for experienced officers, includes a language component that should help the officers to function more effectively in their chosen profession. This phase of the program is implemented at Ripley House, a community center in the heart of a Hispanic area, and includes discussions about Hispanic culture and cultural differences, significant leaders and organizations in the community, and important events in the history of the relations between the groups. Officers attend these classes twice a week, 3 hours a day, for 8 weeks. The goal of these classes is to promote communication between law enforcement officers and members of the Hispanic community. The objectives of this phase are:

- 1) To develop the officers' understanding of Hispanic people and their culture;
- 2) To provide some language training to the officers;
- 3) To expose the officers to a cross section of the Hispanic

“The goal of these classes is to promote communication between law enforcement officers and members of the Hispanic community.”

- community; and
- 4) To motivate the officers to continue learning about Hispanics and their language.

The classes consist of a combination of lectures and discussions on Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, Spanish-surnamed, Hispanics, and undocumented aliens. Where do they come from, and geographically, where are they now? When did they appear in this country? What is the relevance of such information to law enforcement officers? Why are officers responsible for learning about these groups? How is this knowledge applied to aid in effective interaction with members of the Hispanic community? How can this knowledge be useful on the streets, particularly during stressful circumstances?

The various components of Hispanic culture discussed include language, values, body language, and





A Houston police officer dances with a member of the Ballet Folklórico during a community event.

bonding, emphasizing the impact that each component may have on an officer's work. For example, the average Mexican-American has a different attitude about time than his Anglo-American counterpart. Most Hispanics perceive time globally, while most Anglo-Americans perceive it in precise units. This means that when officers ask a Hispanic a question about time, such as "At what time did you leave the house?" the answer, in most cases, will not be concrete. The person may answer "between 3:00 and 6:00," as opposed to "around 3:30." Due to cultural orientation and training, most officers expect a precise answer and perceive the former answer as a sign of the person's unwillingness to cooperate. Understanding this cultural dif-

ference should facilitate the completion of offense reports when the information is provided by Hispanics.

Due to socioeconomic conditions and to cultural orientation, most Hispanics share a household with many other members of their family. It is also not uncommon to find two or three generations living in the same home, or even sharing the same room. Therefore, most Hispanics are not uncomfortable in sharing space around them, and they tend to get closer to other people when speaking to them. Such behavior, often misinterpreted as "invasion of territorial space," causes friction.

Language reveals a lot about a culture, and discussions about it and its

connotations have proven to be both interesting and helpful to the officers. Time does not have as much a tempo for Hispanics as it has for others, and this attitude expresses this in Spanish. Officers says it will be "casi tarde" and "casi temprano." When an English officer says "I'm late," the Hispanic officer will also explain that "I'm late" is a good example of this. According to the dictionary, this simply means "you are late." However, in Spanish, "I'm late" has a different meaning. It is used to describe someone who is late to a party, but it is also used to describe someone who is late to work. This is a common fault shared by those trying to communicate in a different language. Furthermore, many Hispanics, in an effort to be polite, give a lengthy explanation to questions as simple as "Why did you do that?" or "What happened?" Officers misinterpret such explanations as a refusal on the part of the citizen to provide accurate information.

There are also limitations placed on the Spanish speaker by the language. For example, there is only one infinitive in Spanish, "robar," for "to steal," "ladrarse," or "commit theft." The person who takes somebody else's property is a "ladro" (rat man). For this reason, it is difficult, if not impossible, for a Spanish-speaking person to identify the act for the officers without explanation.

In class, officers learn not only that such an act is wrong, but also that such an act is a crime. The result of the explanation is that officers need to listen for key words if the response is given in Spanish. Officers ought to concentrate on key words that answer their questions instead of trying to translate every word. Officers are also exposed to common words that, if not understood, could increase the danger of a situation. For example, the word "querer" is most often used in the translation for the words "having" and "for" in common usage on the streets. "Falta" is found in the dictionary as "lacking" and by the criminal element, and "querer" sometimes means "to take care," but the word is also used to refer to a "bar."

Both general and ethnic stereotypes held by police officers are discussed in class. This is done to increase the officers' awareness of avoided stereotype statements.

A nontraditional approach to answering questions students are reluctant to ask is used. Officers write anonymously a question or questions about Hispanics, which are answered by instructors during class. Experience has shown that if names are not required, the questions often reveal prejudices or stereotypes, such as:

- 1) Why do all Mexicans carry knives?
- 2) Why do Hispanics always lie?
- 3) Why can't these people learn English?
- 4) Why do they always give wrong directions?
- 5) Why is the homicide rate so high in the Hispanic community, etc.?

Once a question is asked, there is an opportunity to provide accurate information and clarify misconceptions. For example, not all Mexicans carry knives; the majority do not carry

weapons of any type, in which there is also a cultural explanation given as to the Hispanic preference for knives as weapons. The basic premise appears to be that both applicants in a fight are given the opportunity to defend themselves, since they must be in close proximity to each other in order to use a knife. This is not necessary when using a gun. Furthermore, a man is surprised to be able to lose a gun at almost any distance, not to mention the language reveals that cultural meaning. The word for "backyard" is "cuartan" (spades) or "back yard" in English. A man "feeds" someone "to quard" his back, not his body.

In dealing with questions such as "Why do Hispanics lie?" and other questions revealing prejudiced and misconceptions, a different technique is used. The instructor asks the class "Why do you suppose Hispanics lie?" Many of the officers' statements provide further opportunity for teaching. An almost standard statement is "When we ask them for their name, they always give us the wrong one." To dispel this particular misconception, one needs only to explain that in the mind of most Hispanics, who are new arrivals to this country, the concept of a last name is nonexistent. To have a last name implies that one name is not as important as the other. People have surnames, not last names.

Furthermore, Hispanics in most Latin countries use their father's and mother's last names. This causes some confusion as to the surname or legal name. Jose Angel Flores Lopez uses all these names, and if he is asked for the last name, he will answer Lopez. That is indeed the last name of the series, but not the surname. Flores

He will be giving the right answer to the wrong question. In fact, the first in the series of last names, in this case Flores, is the legal name. Lopez is the maternal last name. This explanation allows students to understand the position and significance of names, to determine the legal one, and to weaken a stereotype.

In giving directions, most Hispanics use body language and explanations instead of north, south, east, or west. This often leads one unfamiliar with the Hispanic culture to the conclusion that Hispanics always give wrong directions. Again, a simple explanation helps the officer understand where the communication problem may lie.

In order to cope more effectively with the language barrier, a basic system of communication in Spanish is provided. The system, developed over 14 years of research, is based on five of the verbs that Spanish-speaking people use most often. Grammar is avoided, but good pronunciation is emphasized. Officers are exposed not only to the universally accepted forms of the Spanish language but also to the combination of English and Spanish used in the streets. For example, not only do they learn "boleta," the Spanish word for ticket, but also "tickete," the word commonly used in the streets of Houston. Officers also learn many shortcuts leading to better understanding of the language.

After completing the language portion of the classes, an officer is better able to complete traffic tickets and offense reports, and in Spanish, read the Miranda warning, give 15 or 20 of the most commonly used commands, provide first aid, and use commonly used courtesy phrases.



To reinforce the officers' interest and participation in the language component of the program, the Houston police officer is able to earn points toward advanced certification and is awarded an insignia identifying his successful completion of the program. The program is regularly evaluated, and the officers are asked to offer suggestions for its development and improvement.

Officers also have input on the material used during class. The lessons used have, with the suggestions of the officers, been improved. Three books are used in class—two as reference books to be used during class sessions, the other to be used while on duty. The latter is a pocket-size booklet that contains pertinent information. The Miranda warning has been printed in Spanish on the inside cover of the book, and emergency numbers have been printed on the inside of the book-cover.

During the last hour of the class, officers work with community people. This reinforces the language training, and its success depends on previous language experience of the officers, progress made by them in class, and the bilingualism of the volunteers. Volunteers come from a cross section of

the community and range from 6 to 80 years of age. They are also from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Sources of volunteers include schools, community centers, social and service organizations, and personal acquaintances of the director of the program.

Some of the problems encountered during the implementation of the community/officer interaction segment of the program have been interesting. For example, some of the citizens are reluctant to sit close to an officer wearing a uniform, and when they finally do, tension is evident via posture, body language, and other physical signs, such as heavy perspiration. Gradually, friendly interaction takes over—people learn from each other. A good example of this is a 56-year-old man who drove his car for 20 years without a driver's license. He learned from the officers what action was necessary, felt comfortable approaching uniformed officers at the motor vehicle office, and now displays with pride his newly acquired license.

"Officers are exposed not only to the universally accepted forms of the Spanish language but also to the combination of English and Spanish used on the streets."

Volunteers come to class to allow the officers to put into practice what they have learned during the instructional period. In Houston, research demonstrated that non-English speaking citizens are most frequently involved in traffic accidents, traffic violations, and family disturbances. Therefore, this type of roleplaying is most frequently used in the classroom. Volunteers play the role of victims, of a lawbreaker, or any other role that is helpful to the officers.

Officers are asked to set their own roleplaying scenes. This is still done to allow them the flexibility to use whatever vocabulary they need the most, but simple guidelines have been devel-

oped to improve the experience. These guidelines include:

- 1) The initial scenes depict the officer helping a citizen, i.e., giving directions, helping at the scene of an accident, and gradually work up to having a citizen being suspected of a crime.
- 2) Volunteers are not placed in culturally embarrassing situations.
- 3) Officers are encouraged to use their dictionaries, but they also receive instruction as to words that are taboo. The better known dictionaries of English and Spanish, for example, define "to take" as "coger," but in the Houston area, and for most

Hispanics, that word means "to have sexual intercourse."

- 4) Touching is common among members of the Hispanic community. It is a way of reinforcing expression and communication. It is important for officers to understand that when people touch their backs, arms, or hands during class interaction, it is because they are being extended special, friendly gestures. However, touching little girls, even in a friendly gesture, is culturally taboo and simply isn't done by strangers.

A new component is now being incorporated into the roleplaying phase



“The overall evaluation of the program by Hispanic citizens and participating officers has been positive. . . .”

of the program. Citizens are being taught important points about police work. This is done informally by the officers who, on an individual basis, share information that may clarify misconceptions about their work. For example, during a scene where the citizen's car has been stolen, the officer explains to the citizen that it is not essential for police officers to appear on the scene, but that their complaint has been heard and action has been taken. The importance of knowing one's own license plate number is also stressed.

During scenes of domestic disturbances, women learn that there are places they can go for help beyond the help provided by the officers, that officers cannot take the man out of his home without probable cause, etc. Citizens also learn that if charges are not pressed, action may not be taken by the officer.

There are numerous benefits to this program including:

- 1) Both officers and citizens are sensitized to each other's differences, problems, concerns, and similarities. This has resulted in better understanding, respect, and support for each other as individuals and as a group. For instance, officers are learning that sometimes Hispanic citizens tell them what they think officers want to hear, and this is not necessarily done in a negative manner. Therefore, officers are developing questioning techniques to deal with this challenge.

- 2) Language learning takes place not only on the part of the officers participating in the program but also on the part of community people who learn English from the officers. (Many officers stay after class to continue learning Spanish and teaching English). Furthermore, many children and young adults are studying Spanish on their own to earn the opportunity to "teach the policemen." This is particularly significant when one remembers that historically, there has been little incentive for many Spanish surnamed people to develop their own Spanish ability. The result here has been the development of bilingual individuals who benefit both themselves and their community.

- 3) The officers provide additional and different role models in the community for children and for young people to follow. These young people now indicate an interest in law enforcement as a career. An unexpected result of the program has been support of HPD's recruitment efforts, particularly of Hispanics.

Evaluations are an important part of the program's strength and development. At the end of 8 weeks, evaluations given to students include questions pertaining to the language program, the cultural and community participation component, as well as the applicability of the newly developed skills.

A different evaluation form has been developed for community people to evaluate the program and the officers. This form also includes questions pertaining to the development of mutual understanding and to people's willingness to better support their officers.

The evaluations are used to determine the effectiveness of the program in terms of quality of instruction, value to the officers, and benefit to the Hispanic community. The overall evaluation of the program by Hispanic citizens and participating officers has been positive and indicates very strong support for the program on the part of both groups surveyed. The average response regarding the program has been 1.5 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the highest rating. This figure indicates strong support of the instruction, teaching, methodology, course content, and program format. It further signifies the value of the learning experience to the officers, as well as the benefit to the individual Hispanic citizen and the Hispanic community as a whole.

At the conclusion of the course, a fiesta is prepared by community people for the officers. Hispanics of all ages participate in this endeavor.

The demand for the classes has increased and airport police officers and firefighters are now participating in the program. Officers who have completed the class are eligible to participate in a refresher class.

The success of this program can be attributed to the enthusiasm and dedication of the officers, the support of the administration of the Houston Police Department, and the support of the members of the Hispanic community of the Houston area. **FBI**

END