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Crossing language barriers

Spanish training geared toward specific careers

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Castulo López is in the emergency room of Maricopa Medical Center in Phoenix. Dr. Brad Butler is examining his foot for signs of infection after a recent surgery.

"Hablo poquito español," Butler warns - "I speak a little Spanish" - but then he does pretty well, asking in Spanish if López is taking antibiotics or has a fever, and telling him he has no infection in the foot.

Like López, two-thirds of patients at the hospital do not speak English, said public relations liaison Martha Martinez. There are 12 Spanish interpreters on duty around the clock to help as well as on-call interpreters for other languages, but it saves time if employees know how to speak Spanish.

Not to mention, patients like López are more likely to trust doctors and comprehend instructions.

"I can ask questions and I can understand," López said through interpreter Martinez. "I can get more information for myself."

In the medical profession and other fields, like fire fighting and construction, the difference between knowing some Spanish and knowing none can literally mean life and death. Other workers simply want to serve their communities and customers better.

To aid the effort, many local colleges and language schools offer Spanish geared to specific careers. Phoenix College has a laundry list of classes, including Spanish for bank tellers, automobile salespeople, even "Survival Spanish for Jail Facilities." Mesa Community College offers Law Enforcement Spanish I and II, among others.

And the city of Phoenix has a full-time language program coordinator, Mariana de la Fuente, whose job is to make sure any employee who wants to learn another language - whether it's Spanish, Russian, Chinese or other - can find a class.

"As far as I know," she said, "we are the only city (in the country) that has organized and comprehensive language training."

De la Fuente said the city's effort initially started with the police, fire and neighborhood services departments. In time, they discovered other employees - aviation workers at Sky Harbor International Airport, for



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instance, or city courts - could use language skills. Now, even Mayor Phil Gordon takes Spanish classes as time allows.

Some classes are taught on-site by city employees like de la Fuente. She also contracts out with colleges and language schools like Interlingua, a private school in central Phoenix where all the teachers are native speakers. The city's tuition reimbursement program covers the cost as long as a student passes the course.

Learning Spanish at Interlingua has been a big help to Phoenix Firefighter Kevin Parks.

"We had a lady having a diabetic problem last shift and we were able to find out what medication she was on, her medication history and things like that, so the paramedics could make a better evaluation," he said.

The fire department also has an innovative immersion program at station 58 in Laveen at 4718 W. Dobbins Road. Firefighters leave their usual station and spend four months speaking solely Spanish there. They also take Spanish classes on-site with an instructor who is a firefighter and crew member. All objects in the station, including all the kitchen utensils, are labeled in Spanish.

"They do their regular duties, except they're immersed in Spanish," said Bobby Ruiz, deputy fire chief. The firefighters also practice their new skill by doing community activities like blood pressure checks.

Ruiz said he gets 250 to 300 letters of interest every four months from city firefighters, and out of those they choose nine. Because of the popularity, they're going to expand the program to two more stations scheduled to open in 2005 and 2006.

Other cities around the area like Chandler and Peoria are considering setting up similar programs, he said, and Georgetown, Va., has studied the system and implemented it there.

Of course, some contend everyone in the United States should speak English. But it takes time for recent immigrants to become fluent, and especially in times of distress, it can be difficult to speak coherently even in a native language.

"We can't afford to put politics in front of saving someone's life, and we won't," Ruiz said.

Medical personnel and emergency workers aren't the only ones who find it helpful to know Spanish.

"For me, it's to communicate safety," said Shawn Manske of Gilbert, who is a safety director for a Mesa construction firm. "We work at heights a lot, so falls are our biggest danger."

He said an employee recently was about 30 feet up on a roof and was not tied off properly. Thanks to what he learned in Workplace Spanish for Commercial Construction at Chandler-Gilbert Community College, Manske was able to tell the worker he needed to be tied off for fall protection.

It's also important for human resources personnel to translate policies into Spanish so that workers understand the law, which is why Bashas', Safeway, the Dial Corp. and others are clients at Interlingua, said company founder Yolima Otálora.

Spanish-speaking employees will sign a form pertaining to, say, sexual harassment on the job, but might not understand their rights or how to report a problem, she said. Those workers might be subjected to unfair treatment, and the company opens itself up to lawsuits.

For that type of communication, it's necessary to have documents translated properly and someone trained to explain them. But in many cases, students say, it's not a problem if they're not fluent, the fact that

they're making an effort speaks volumes.

"As a supervisor," said construction manager Alfred Tsang of Gilbert, "if you try to learn their language, it shows respect and they reciprocate."

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