



## Fire and Police Commission

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### Memorandum

To: MaryNell Regan, Executive Director

From: Paulina de Haan, Policy Director for Emergency Communications

Date: January 13, 2017

RE: Analysis of bilingual staff at MPD and MFD 911 Centers

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At the Public Safety Committee on December 1, 2016, Alderman José Pérez requested information regarding staffing levels of bilingual employees to handle 911 calls from residents with limited English proficiency. This memorandum serves as a response to this inquiry about staffing levels working at both the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) and Milwaukee Fire Department (MFD) 911 centers to determine if the Fire and Police Commission (FPC) should request that certain positions be designated as “bilingual” and pursue a targeted recruitment for 911 bilingual staff.

#### ***Current Policy and Practice of Bilingual Staff at the City’s 911 Centers***

The MPD is the primary Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), or 911 center, for the City. Therefore, all initial 911 and non-emergency calls are handled first by MPD Emergency Communication Operators (ECO). The MFD takes on any fire or medical related 911 calls that are transferred over from MPD.

When limited English residents call 911 and there are no bilingual staff available, MPD and MFD utilize a third party translation service. Initiating this service requires ECOs at MPD to first determine if language needs are necessary and then, using a preset speed dial button, patching in the translator to the call. The third party service typically answers within the first few rings. MFD may also initiate translation services, however, it is rare since most bilingual calls transferred from MPD have the service already on the line.

At this time, no report nor audit exist that analyzes how third party translation services impact response times. According to MPD officials, the entire process of initiating the third party translation service is minimal and never requires more than one minute to complete the process. Moreover, Spanish is the most highly requested language; therefore, getting a Spanish translator on the line is quicker than all other languages. Once the translation service is initiated, they remain on the call for its entirety, which includes being transferred to MFD if the caller requires fire or medical service.

Neither MPD nor MFD offer bilingual incentive pay for civilian staff, while sworn MPD staff receive a small increase in pay that is defined in current Milwaukee Police Association (MPA) and Milwaukee Police Supervisors Organization (MPSO) union contracts. Regarding the



MPD's 911 center, MPD's Human Resources (HR) survey employees for second language capabilities and whether those employees are willing to volunteer their services. According to MPD HR, their 911 center currently employs three registered Spanish bilingual staff. MFD also surveys employees and the MFD 911 Center has one Spanish bilingual staff member.

MPD and MFD utilize LanguageLine Solutions as their third party translation service. A five month review reveals that 90.7% of calls requiring translation were for Spanish, or a total of 2,522 calls, which equals 271 hours of Spanish translation. Working under the terms of a statewide contract through the Department of Children and Families, the company charges both departments a discounted rate of \$.72 per minute for initiated 911 calls, which is invoiced monthly. In 2016, the total annual cost for MPD's 911 center was \$24,717.94. At MFD, translation services are invoiced monthly at only \$30 to \$50 per month, or approximately \$500 per year.

### ***Proposed Recommendations***

Increasing Spanish speaking call takers at both MPD and MFD 911 centers will reduce dependence upon third party language service providers. Reducing the time it takes to initiate a third party translation service should have a quality enhancing effect. According to MPD, in order to effectively impact bilingual services, a targeted recruitment to fill at least 10 Spanish bilingual staff positions would allow for at least one, or ideally two, in each shift. MFD's 911 center would require at least five Spanish bilingual staff to cover all shifts. A remaining question is how the bilingual staff would be monitored if there was not also a bilingual supervisor on staff.

Increasing bilingual staff cannot simply occur without sufficient coordination and planning between MPD and MFD, and in partnership with the FPC. In order to most effectively increase bilingual staff without impacting services to City residents a long-term strategy is essential. There are significant considerations that must be addressed prior to any recruitment effort, and they include: 1) review and determine the feasibility of incentive pay for bilingual staff, 2) develop protocols for auditing bilingual calls, 3) assess call transfer policies between MPD and MFD, and 4) align the timeline to impact both MPD and MFD simultaneously.

1. *Review and determine the feasibility of bilingual incentive pay.* Currently, only the MPA and MPSO union contracts delineate a small increase in base pay for sworn officers with bilingual capabilities. The premium pay increase is \$1.00 per hour for MPSO members and \$2.50 per hour for MPA members spent performing translation duties. Firefighters do not receive bilingual incentive pay. Nationally and historically, the turnover rate for 911 call taker positions is extremely high. There are also national efforts to reclassify 911 call takers as public safety employees rather than administrative employees. Given the unique and highly specialized nature of 911, there may be long term benefits in providing more opportunities for incentive pay, including reducing turnover and enhancing service to residents.
2. *Develop procedures and policies for auditing bilingual calls.* Audits of 911 calls are performed regularly by both MPD and MFD as a quality assurance measure and as a tool for employee assessments. This process entails managerial staff listening to recorded 911 calls and providing line staff with an analysis of the overall call. Because most calls requiring translation include a third party translator, a supervisor is able to immediately review a non-English call. However, as bilingual staff is

increased, and since neither department currently employs a bilingual supervisor, procedures and policies must address the need for translation of recorded calls during the audit and review process, or even in the moment.

3. *Assess call transfer policies between MPD and MFD.* While increasing the number of Spanish bilingual ECOs reduces MPD's dependence upon a third party service, it will increase translation needs for MFD. If the ECO were to remain on the call to provide translation service for MFD, it would remove an available call taker from the primary PSAP for the duration of the call. It should also be noted that MFD bilingual requirements will be more extensive than MPD given the medical nature of calls. Furthermore, calls transferred between MFD and MPD cannot be guaranteed to always be picked up a bilingual call taker; therefore, both 911 centers will have to assess and coordinate policies that address bilingual staff and third party translation services during transfers between PSAPs.
4. *Align MPD and MFD recruitment timelines.* In order to reduce any possible negative impact on City residents, bilingual recruitment by both 911 centers should occur in tandem. Several major initiatives are currently underway at both MPD and MFD that impact a bilingual recruitment timeline. MPD is preparing for at least 33 new staff to begin by February 2017. MFD is undergoing a review of its positions and career ladder (similar to what is occurring at MPD) which will impact MFD call takers' pay and position responsibilities. Along with the need for MPD and MFD to work together to develop a strategic plan to address the concerns discussed in this memo, neither department can properly address an increase in bilingual staff until MPD's current vacancies are filled and MFD's career ladder process is completed.

Residents with limited English capabilities already, and will continue to, receive service when they call 911. With proper allocation of resources, the FPC has the ability to conduct a targeted recruitment for bilingual staff and also to prepare testing in Spanish ensuring quality candidates for both MPD and MFD 911 centers. Even if both 911 centers successfully recruit the minimum 15 bilingual staff, however, it will not be possible to stop using a third party translation service because of the need for other languages and the reality that a bilingual staff member will not always be available to take a Spanish-speaking call. While a bilingual recruitment is possible, the strategic plan to address complex operational issues must occur first.

Increasing bilingual capable staff within local government enhances the City's ability to provide effective and efficient service to Milwaukee residents. However, in a high volume, high stress environment, it is imperative that sufficient planning is conducted prior to any major recruitment.