

Recruiting Asian Americans as Police Officers
In the 21st Century: How Do We Entice Them?

Article

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HISTORICAL CHALLENGE

A desperate 9-11 call for help comes from a Chinese woman in Alhambra, California. Her voice is so low, almost mute, because she is afraid her neighbors, the Chen's, may hear she has called to report the domestic abuse that occurs nightly at her neighbor's residence. She explains in broken English what she is witnessing and that she wants the police to respond immediately to save the woman's life next door. The dispatcher instantly recognizes a severe language barrier may exist, both with the caller and perhaps also at the home of the abuse. She dispatches an officer and then begins contacting one of a number of local Chinese translators to assist at the scene.

In the San Gabriel area of suburban southern California, it is not uncommon to encounter situations where language barriers impede the police from assisting during an emergency. Often, the immediate need for police action does not allow for the presence of a translator, and the safety of those present becomes very dicey if the officer's commands are not understood or ignored. The described scenario is very real in the San Gabriel Valley and many California communities where large Asian populations exist. Police departments in these cities are grappling with ways to cross this language and cultural divide, and are vigorously seeking ways to retain Asian officers to aid in bridging the gaps that are increasingly prevalent. Unfortunately, the number of officers of Asian

descent in even the largest agencies is sparse; in small and medium-sized agencies, they are almost not present.

THE RECRUITMENT OF OFFICERS OF ASIAN DESCENT

Recruitment of Asian police officers has traditionally been a unique challenge for the law enforcement profession. During the past five years, only 922 Asians were appointed to full-time police officer positions in the state of California¹. In the city of Alhambra, a community of 92,000 northeast of downtown Los Angeles, the Police Department has been able to retain only seven Asian officers of a total staff of 94 to serve its 43,000 residents of Asian descent. City Personnel Director Richard Bacio attributes this low percentage to the fact that Asians generally seek careers in private enterprise where job benefits and management opportunities are greater. Mr. Bacio also said in his experience, Asians seem to have little interest in government jobs.² Deputy Paul Takeyama of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Recruitment Unit said he has traveled to various cities throughout California in search of Asian applicants and finds recruiting Asians difficult because of language and cultural differences from the majority of English-speaking Americans.³

Like Deputy Takeyama's agency, many police departments in the San Gabriel Valley with large Asian populations need bilingual officers to serve in their communities. These

¹ Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training Summary of Asian/Pacific Island Full-Time Peace Officer Personnel Report

² Bacio, Richard. Telephone interview. 14 Sep. 2005.

³ Takeyama, Paul. Telephone interview. 13 Sep. 2005.

smaller departments in the region must compete with larger and better paying agencies such as the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, the Los Angeles Police Department and various State agencies to hire and retain the few qualified applicants that both have the interest and who can successfully complete the rigorous testing and training processes.

DEMOGRAPHICS & POPULATION GROWTH

During the past two decades, the Asian population in Los Angeles County has grown significantly from 433,517 to 1,164,553⁴. In the East San Gabriel Valley, the Chinese, Taiwanese and Vietnamese populations have increased significantly because of newer, bigger homes and better living conditions for many who have experienced success working in the greater Los Angeles area. The number of communities with a majority Asian population increased from one in 1990 to seven by 2000. Six of these cities are in the San Gabriel Valley⁵. Asian Americans continue to be the fastest-growing ethnic group in this area of Los Angeles County. The cities of Monterey Park and Cerritos have Asian Populations of over 60 percent, while double digit growth rates have pushed the cities of Cerritos, Rowland Heights, San Gabriel, San Marino and Rosemead over the 50 percent mark⁶.

⁴ FreeDemographics. Retrieved August 25, 2005, from <http://www.freedemographics.com> This site provides historical data on Los Angeles County demographics.

⁵ Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California. the diverse face of Asian and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles County Report 2004: 6.

⁶ Ibid 6.

A 2004 Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) study conducted with the assistance of the United Way of Greater Los Angeles indicated that more than half the Asian households in El Monte, San Gabriel, and Rosemead and just under half the households in Alhambra and Monterey Park are categorized as, “linguistically isolated.” The term “linguistically isolated,” is defined as; one where no family members 14 years or older are proficient in English.⁷ Using Alhambra as an example, that would mean that about 20,000 persons (perhaps 7-10,000 households) would have significant difficulty accessing emergency services and having their actual needs met in times of crisis. Clearly, creating a system where every resident of a community can communicate with those who arrive to save their lives and property should be a priority for any city. In this instance, one of the most viable solutions would be to hire personnel who can speak the languages of these households and understand the cultural norms that could impede the successful conclusion of a call for service. The need, therefore, is to hire officers of Asian descent with these capabilities.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

So, why is it so difficult to attract and recruit qualified Asians to work in the law enforcement profession? What methods for future recruitment will prove to be most effective? Let’s look at the barriers to hiring and retaining qualified candidates that would serve the goals of communicating with everyone in our neighborhoods, and also look at current and possible future strategies to overcome the status quo.

⁷ Ibid 15.

Language barriers continue to be a major obstacle. Ms. Kimiko Kelly, a research analyst at APALC stated that, “With growth fueled by immigration, the great issue is the language barrier. Many of these people have limited English, and there is a great need, an increased need, for more services.” Another factor that hinders recruitment is the long-standing negative perceptions of a law enforcement career instilled by family elders in the younger generation. Many foreign-born Asian families continue to distrust the police or other government officials and do not consider a career in law enforcement an honorable profession. “This is because many recent Asian immigrants come from countries where the police were seen as completely corrupt, woefully ineffective, or even working in conjunction with gangs.”⁸

Dr. Jenny Wong, Human Resource Consultant at the University of Phoenix, states that “Asian parents also discourage their children from considering law enforcement as a desirable career for reasons such as the dangerous working conditions involved, the undesirable work shifts, the perception that pay and benefits are minimal, and the lack of prestige, because of the minimum standards required to enter the job.”⁹ Asian families emphasize to their children the importance of education and see most government jobs as a waste of their children’s educational investments. They are overly concerned about impressions and comparing their children with others in the Asian community. They want their children to hold what they consider “prestigious” careers such as a doctor or a lawyer. “The drive for success and status within Asian American culture can be quite intense. For many, being a medical doctor is considered to be the pinnacle of

⁸ Asian-Nation Asian American Gangs. Retrieved September 14, 2005 from <http://www.asian-nation.org> :
3 This website provided an article covering the history of Asian Gangs and cultural characteristics.

⁹ Wong, Jenny. Personal Interview. 14 Sep. 2005.

achievement and virtually nothing can make an Asian parent more proud than having his/her son or daughter reach the status of joining the medical profession.”¹⁰

The foreign-born Asian community will eventually assimilate into mainstream American society, where these perceptions and beliefs will be dispelled over time. For example, the myth that Asians are well-off and well educated has already been dispelled. Less than half of Los Angeles County’s Asian residents have a college degree and in five Los Angeles County cities, more than 20 percent of the Asian population lives below the poverty line.¹¹ For Departments to dispel the community’s negative perceptions and beliefs of law enforcement, they must build trust and relationships through personal contact and education, especially since most Departments focus on Community Oriented Policing Strategies (COPS) that require police officers to work closely with the community to resolve anticipated problems.

ASIAN POLICE OFFICERS

Los Angeles Police Department Sergeant Daniel Wong, President of the Law Enforcement Association of Asian Pacifics, stated that very few Asians entered the law enforcement profession prior to the 1980s. During the late 1970s and early 1980s greater numbers of Asians began to enter the law enforcement profession. Sergeant Wong said that those Asians were not foreign-born and were first or second generation members that

¹⁰ Asian-Nation “Doctors: The APA Dream Profession” Retrieved September 14, 2005 from <http://www.asian-nation.org>. This website provided a brief article on The drive for Asians to enter the medical field as the ultimate profession.

¹¹ Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California. the diverse face of Asian and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles County. Report 2004: 11.

have lived in the United States for most of their lives. Asian police officers born in America are naturally quite different from foreign-born immigrants because they do not have the language difficulties and are fully assimilated into the American culture.¹²

Officer Simon Bangphraxay, a Recruitment Officer for the Los Angeles Police Department, has been conducting recruitment directed at the Asian workforce for the past five-years. She said that education is the most important factor in getting through to the Asian community. Officer Bangphraxay said her goal is to break cultural barriers by providing education at special recruitment fairs held at Asian churches and colleges where there are high concentrations of Asian students. Her efforts have been successful when these locations are canvassed by her team and personal contact is made to as many residents as possible.

Because of the few Asians working in the law enforcement profession, Asian Police Officer Associations began to form to provide support to each other. Since the early 1980s, these organizations have increased their membership and have joined with Asian Police Associations in other parts of the nation to gain greater recognition¹³. Some of these pioneer Asian officers now hold high ranking positions, most notably Heather Fong, appointed Chief of Police in San Francisco in 2004. Many, though, do not have the requisite bilingual abilities or cultural knowledge needed to address the current immigrant population's needs. The severity of this issue will only increase, so methods must be developed to immediately recruit officers with those needed skills.

¹² Wong, Daniel. Telephone interview. 13 Sep. 2005.

¹³ Law Enforcement Association of Asian Pacifics. Retrieved September 14, 2005, from <http://www.leaap.org> This site provided a brief history on Asian Law Enforcement associations.

CURRENT PRACTICES IN POLICE RECRUITMENT

Recruitment practices for many law enforcement agencies have been relatively unchanged and reactive. Common practice would be for the department to request a recruitment drive for a particular position. The Police Department or city's Human Resources Department will initiate a recruitment drive by posting flyers and conducting advertisements for the position. Through advertisements, people will respond and submit their applications. The department will process the applications for those who meet the minimum qualifications. Those who meet the minimum qualifications will be subjected to various tests, including written and physical agility tests, an extensive background investigation, a polygraph test, medical and psychological examinations and some final staff interviews before being hired and sent to a police academy for training.

Generally, small and mid-sized police departments (up to 200 officers) have one or two officers assigned to a Training and Personnel Section. These officers will be tasked to conduct department recruitment, over-see testing procedures, conduct in-service training, maintain equipment and a host of other time consuming duties. Small to mid-sized Departments have experienced staffing shortages due to retirements and those who move to larger agencies. Officers assigned to the recruitment sections are scrambling to hire and replace vacant positions in the quickest manner possible. They are not necessarily trying to recruit and hire the people that have the skills that would best benefit the department and community. There are also no considerations made for additional language or cultural skills that would help in a multi-ethnic Asian community. This only

solves the staffing problem in the short term and lacks the foresight of planning for long-term needs of the community. A long-term strategy is needed to recruit officers with bilingual skills to build stronger relationships within their communities.

ALTERNATIVES FOR THE FUTURE

An alternative strategy is needed to augment the normal recruitment practices. A dedicated team of officers, free from other duties must go out to the community and develop methods to effectively recruit Asian officers. These recruitment drives should be directed at the many local cultural festivals and other multi-ethnic events where a large applicant pool can be drawn. In addition to recruitment and job fairs, educational classes describing the police service should be conducted at local elementary and high schools, focusing on the future workforce. Adult school classes have helped dispel the myths that American law enforcement is corrupt and eventually this information will be spread throughout the immigrant community.

One Agency that has taken traditional recruiting efforts a step further is the Burlington, Vermont, Police Department. Immigrants from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Balkans are transforming the ethnic make-up of the city. The Burlington Police Department's 95 member force still mirrors the old state demographics, which reflected 96.8% white in the most recent census. The Department recognized the need for change and launched an aggressive diversification campaign. With a Justice Department Grant, the Department hired community consultants to recruit potential officers from the city's

ethnic enclaves. These consultants are foreign born themselves and understand that many immigrants come from places where the police are not there to protect its citizens. The Department realizes they must educate people from different cultures to understand that their ideas of policing from their native countries are quite different than American policing methods. The consultants act as recruitment ambassadors for the Department and meet with individuals or groups throughout the city at locations with high concentrations of immigrants.¹⁴

There are many other sources, such as various Asian Police Associations, willing to assist small to mid-sized police departments with the recruitment of Asian officers. These associations will share information on recruitment strategies, up-coming cultural events, provide staffing, recruitment paraphernalia and participate with agencies in local activities. In the San Gabriel Valley, numerous civic leaders also recognize the need for Asian bilingual officers and are willing to offer assistance by providing opportunities for law enforcement recruitment.

Many civic leaders promote safety awareness to their employees and the community and host these presentations at their businesses. During these presentations, local police departments are often invited to send a representative to present safety tips or give updates on crime trends. During these presentations, many attendees see another side of police officers and leave with a positive impression of the police department. These

¹⁴ Mehren, Elizabeth. "Police Force Tries to Diversify Ranks"
San Gabriel Valley Tribune 10 May 2004, San Gabriel Valley ed.: A11

presentations will also offer an opportunity to advertise and conduct recruitment during the session.

Mr. David Gee, President of the Los Angeles Chinatown Public Safety Association, stated that these events are positive in nature, very educational and have been successful in breaking down barriers and providing a recruitment platform. It is his hope that Asian elders attending these events will see police officers in a different light, dispel the perception that police officers are corrupt and encourage their children to consider a career in the law enforcement profession.¹⁵

Individual police departments must recognize the need for officers that reflect the community and commit to redirecting some of its efforts to diversify its workforce. The first priority is to identify minimum requirements for police positions, re-evaluate language skill requirements, making job flyers and advertisements in multi-language formats, enlist existing Asian officers and solicit support and assistance from local civic and business leaders. The Los Angeles Chinese American Sheriff Advisory Committee (LACASA) is one such organization that provides the local sheriff's office with a means to connect with the community. LACASA is a formally recognized organization consisting of numerous individuals from various professions. These individual have knowledge of the Asian community and volunteer to provide assistance with their professional skills and recommend methods to bring the department and community together.

¹⁵ Gee, David. Telephone interview. 13 Sep. 2005.

Departments should also utilize existing programs to develop future police applicants. Police Explorer and Cadet Programs offer an opportunity for those not yet ready to become full-time police officers to develop skills and gain experience that will prepare them for a police officer position. The focus on an internal workforce will hopefully result in an employee that is intimately familiar with the department and community. Citizen Volunteer and citizen police academies will continue to bring the community and Department together by education through participation.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

Recruiters for law enforcement agencies will have to consider the ethnic make-up of their service area and try to have a police force that reflects the community. The increased Asian immigrant population in the San Gabriel Valley has created the demand for recruitment of Asian bilingual officers. It is important to have police officers that come from the same backgrounds as the citizens they serve to communicate with and understand their specific needs.

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the San Gabriel Valley. The need for bilingual Asian officers to work in multi-ethnic communities is real and immediate. The fact remains that recruiting for public safety careers in Asian communities remains difficult because of the differences in language and culture. It may be some time before our local police forces are able to diversify their ranks with sufficiently to meet the demands of the communities with large Asian populations.

To begin the process for change, trust must be developed between the police department and the community. Recruitment for Asian officers should be a priority to begin that process. Many larger agencies have been successful in their recruitment efforts by identifying the barriers between the two cultures and making a sincere effort to bridge the gap. Strategies must include the dedication of the recruitment plan. The strategy will involve convincing Asian elders and immigrants that the law enforcement profession in America is honorable and professional. There are many opportunities to make connections by attending cultural events and festivals as well as utilizing local leaders to provide opportunities when recruitment could be included. These opportunities include safety presentations and crime trend presentations. In any case, any opportunity where an officer can be seen in a positive manner will instill trust and confidence in the police force. Recruitment information will need to be produced in multi-language formats and distributed at local cultural festivals, events, schools and churches where high concentrations of Asian can be found. Agencies should also realize that with its best efforts, recruitment of Asians will be difficult and time consuming. Other sources for recruitment should be researched to augment Department efforts.

Some may say that we merely use emerging technologies such as translation programs as a means to cross the language and cultural divide. It is always useful to assess how technology might help achieve our goals; however, electronic translation is currently in its infancy. One-way translation is now in use, but a machine to allow for universal understanding appears to be years away as a viable substitute for human interaction. Even if electronic translation becomes a reality, when people are in tense and dangerous

situations there is no substitute for a familiar face or someone that understands the culture and has the language skills needed to resolve the situation.

In the last ten years the Asian population in California grew at a rate of 35 percent.¹⁶ If this rate of Asian population growth in California continues, in the next ten years California will have at least 1,687,000 people of Asian descent. Research has shown that the majority of the Asians in California cannot speak English, and it would be reasonable to conclude that many in the future will have similar language barriers with regard to accessing government services. If recruitment of Asian officers does not keep up with the Asian population growth, we will be in an even worse situation than we are in today.

CONCLUSION

The California Peace Officers Association (CPOA) Standards and Training Commission have begun to make inroads into the topic by planning a Recruitment and Retention Symposium in the near future and the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) is engaged in similar efforts to recruit suitable candidates into the profession. The CPOA symposium will hopefully be able to develop action plans to improve recruitment and retention along with making recommendations for POST involvement. These activities should establish a foundation for a new future in recruitment practices for law enforcement agencies to recruit qualified bilingual officers. In Alhambra and elsewhere with significant populations of Asian descent, the need is

¹⁶ Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California. the diverse face of Asian and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles County. Report 2004: 6.

already here. Local communities, business organizations and the State are working to address this gap in service capacity; clearly, more remains to be done.