

# Police, 911 tongue-tied in Burmese community

**HOLLY ABRAMS**  
*The Journal Gazette*

Dawn McGahen doesn't remember taking calls from Burmese-speaking people when she was hired as a Fort Wayne police dispatcher in 1995. Dispatchers now take dozens of these calls each year.

As the number of Burmese refugees in the city has grown, so has the need for Burmese-speaking police officers and dispatchers. But the department has no officers who speak Burmese, and all dispatchers speak only English.

The police department says finding qualified bilingual candidates is a challenge. Officers and dispatchers resort to what they say are the best alternatives.

McGahen, now the training coordinator for Fort Wayne communications, recognizes the challenges faced by callers and dispatchers when there is a language barrier. She, along with Rick Piatt, a local volunteer in the Burmese community, are working to develop a lesson plan to teach local Burmese refugees some basic questions asked by police and dispatchers and how to answer them.

"More education needs to be done (within the community)," she said.

Piatt, who lives in Whitley County, drives to Fort Wayne twice a week to teach a group of Burmese-speaking adults. His work is through The Reclamation Project, a local organization with a



**Htay Win, left, Nyo Nyo Win, front, and Mariam Ma learn pronouns during an English class with Rick Piatt, a volunteer with The Reclamation Project. The local organization teaches English to non-English speakers.**

*Cathie Rowand | The Journal Gazette*



# BURMESE

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goal to bridge the gap between refugees and the predominantly English-speaking community they live in. Fort Wayne has an estimated 5,400 to 5,800 Burmese refugees, according to figures kept by Catholic Charities. And that number keeps growing each year as more refugees are brought to the city and other refugees relocate to Fort Wayne to be with their families.

These refugees make up about 2 percent of the city's population. According to enrollment records kept by Fort Wayne Community Schools, nearly 4,000 of its 31,500 enrolled students speak a language other than English at home or have a language besides English as their native language.

## Trying process

Piatt retired in 2004 as a construction manager for the city, where he was an immigrant liaison. Piatt would often be sent to explain to different communities, including the Bosnian, Vietnamese, African and Hispanic cultures, how construction processes work.

"Even the common citizen has trouble going through the government gantlet, and it's that much more complicated with the language barriers," said Piatt, who has worked with the

project since 2009.

That trouble includes making a 911 call.

Piatt's current class consists of eight adults from Myanmar, formerly Burma. They meet at a student's home and play out real-life scenarios in an effort to bridge the language gap many refugees experience.

Piatt hopes to make progress over the next year as he plays out police and fire-related scenarios with the group of adults he is teaching. The group just finished a unit on describing people.

He explained how descriptions are critical to police when there is a missing child or when someone is the victim of a crime.

"It's a total immersion (teaching) so it gets them away from that crutch that everybody likes - an interpreter," Piatt said.

Piatt uses visuals as he teaches. But he never speaks Burmese. He said speaking English is the best way to teach a new language and develop conversation skills. It's a trying process, and after an hour-long session his students are tired. But it's worth it, he said.

Myo Myint is a Burmese refugee who also teaches English through The Reclamation Project. He tells his classes the importance of learning English - something he said he taught himself during a 15-year prison sentence for speaking out in favor of democracy in his native country.

"This is very important

## MOST REQUESTED

**Top 10 languages for landline interpretation services in Indiana as recorded by Language Line Services as of July 2008:**

1. Spanish
2. Burmese
3. Mandarin
4. Russian
5. Vietnamese
6. Arabic
7. Portuguese
8. French
9. Karen
10. Somali

Source: Language Line Services

for the Burmese people who live here, because they do not know some of the rules and regulations of the United States," said Myo Myint, who was granted a U.S. visa in 2008.

Myo Myint has also translated a list of concerns the police department has for distribution to the Burmese community.

Among those top concerns: learning that police are good; traffic safety; and that children must be supervised.

## Local volunteers

When police officers encounter a language barrier on the street, they call for an officer who speaks that language, according to officer Raquel Foster, police spokeswoman, who also speaks Spanish.

"We always hope that the victim will have someone help to translate," she said.

In addition to several officers who speak Spanish, the department has officers fluent in sign language, Japanese, French and German.

Another option is for

## LANGUAGE LINE

Dale Hansman, a spokesman for Language Line Services, said the company in Monterey, Calif., provides both written and oral interpretation from English into about 170 languages.

The company was founded in 1982 as a non-profit, started by an officer with the San Jose Police Department who saw a need for interpretation services.

The company serves police and government agencies in the U.S. and Canada, along with several health care organizations and the public. Services are provided based on a fee. Fees for interpretation increase based on the duration of a phone call, Hansman said.

police to use a list of local volunteer interpreters, according to McGahen. Burmese-speaking interpreters are among the 33 on the list. Some of those listed also interpret in the local courts system, McGahen said. The Fort Wayne Police Department's Victim Assistance maintains a similar list.

Police will try to find a neighbor, family member or friend of a crime victim to provide interpretation at the scene, Foster said. Area advocacy centers and churches might also be used to find interpreters.

## Perception of police

Even with the progress in education, Fort Wayne Police Chief Rusty York said crimes are often unreported among those who do not speak English.

"In the Hispanic community - to a larger degree in the Burmese community - crime is underreported because of their perception of law enforcement from their native country," he said. "A lot of times those police departments weren't that professional and sometimes corrupt. With some cultures there is a reluctance to interact with police."

York said he has seen vast improvement in police interactions with the city's His-

panic communities, in part because of the addition of a Hispanic liaison officer. Officer Ricardo Robles, a 31-year member of the force who speaks Spanish, has been in this position since 2002.

"We see a huge need in the Burmese community," Robles said, adding it's nearly impossible to have a bilingual officer on the force for every language spoken in the city.

The challenge is finding qualified bilingual officer candidates who speak Burmese and are U.S. citizens. While being bilingual is a benefit to police work, that ability alone cannot place someone on the force, York said.

"It's very difficult, especially in the Burmese community, to find candidates, the younger people, ... who are eligible because of citizenship issues," he said. "It's a very comprehensive process and a demanding process, and we lose people at every step."

York said he recalls at least one Burmese candidate who applied to be a police officer but did not make it through the interview process.

## 'Costly service'

In the meantime, on the

dispatching end, an interpreter is used to complete a call. "We can usually tell what language they (callers) speak," she said.

Spanish is second to English among calls received by dispatchers, according to department records. Burmese-speaking callers come in a close third.

In 2009, dispatchers used Language Line Services more than 100 times to interpret calls made by Spanish-speaking people. The same service was used more than 70 times for Burmese-speaking callers, according to 911 communications records.

Cell phone calls that require an interpreter are paid for by the Indiana Wireless E911 Advisory Board. According to records kept by the board's call processing vendor, INdigital Telecom, based in Fort Wayne, no calls have been logged from cell phone callers to police in Fort Wayne or Allen County that needed an interpreter service.

"It's a costly service but it's well worth it," said Susan Rarey, operations manager for Fort Wayne communications.

In 2009, calls for interpreter services cost the city more than \$3,600.

There are ways these costs could be reduced, but it will take time and education. Myo Myint said he would like to see more police officers learn to speak some Burmese words. This would also help smooth the interactions his native people have with law enforcement, he said.

"I made up my mind, ... whenever I have the chance, I will help the American people," he said. "If I have the chance I want to teach the language to the police." habrams@jig.net

## CALLS FOR INTERPRETERS

**Calls made by Fort Wayne 911 Communications to Language Line Services**

Year	Spanish	Burmese	Other	Total cost
2009	102	73	7	\$3,664.90
2008	168	43	21	\$3,391.12
2007	161	16	10	\$2,376.57

Source: Fort Wayne 911 communications records