



Resource Briefing

Public Safety and Bilingual Ability Pay

February 2008

“Special pay” supplements a law enforcement officer's salary due to a specific skill held by that officer above the standard qualifications for the position. Bilingual ability is one such skill often eligible for special pay.

Law enforcement agencies commonly offer special pay. Half of all local police departments in the U.S. in cities with populations of 1,000,000 or more offer special pay for bilingual ability. For cities between 50,000 and 100,000, more than a quarter of police departments offer such special pay. As of 2003, 23% of all local police officers in the United States worked for departments authorizing bilingual ability pay.¹

The following law enforcement agencies in Georgia offer special pay for bilingual abilities:

- Albany Police Department
- Cherokee County Sheriff
- Dougherty County Sheriff
- Duluth Police Department
- Floyd County Sheriff
- Rockdale County Sheriff

[The Athens Banner-Herald has reported](#) on the efforts of local law enforcement agencies to hire bilingual staff: “...[M]ost law enforcement officers say very few in their communities resent the police's effort to reach out to Spanish-only speakers, even in the middle of the debates across the nation over making English the official language. Aside from helping immigrants, bilingual officers also ensure their own safety and can engage people at crime scenes who might hide behind the inability to speak English.”²

The federal government has recognized the need to promote foreign language ability as a security measure. According to the State Department, “Deficits in foreign language learning and teaching negatively affect our national security, diplomacy, law enforcement, intelligence communities and cultural understanding.”³ President Bush, concerned with the lack of critical foreign language skills by national security staffers, introduced the National Security Language Initiative in 2006 to promote foreign language acquisition.

Some Georgia counties with large percentages of their population that speak English “less than very well”:

- Gwinnett (15.8%)
- Clayton (10.7%)
- DeKalb (9.1%)
- Cobb (8.8%)
- Fulton (6.6%)

Several counties across Georgia are facing the challenges of promoting public safety in more and more diverse communities. In Gwinnett County, one out of six residents speaks English less than very well. A local government currently may choose to hire a police officer, sheriff, EMT, or 911 operator that can communicate with members of the community. A local law enforcement agency may want to hire a Spanish speaking officer to work undercover and infiltrate a Spanish speaking organized crime ring. Attempts to limit local governments from rewarding employees with bilingual skills may have the unintended consequence of diminishing public safety in Georgia.

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¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Local Police Departments, 2003.

² Athens Herald, Towns struggle to hire bilingual officers, December 17, 2006

³ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/58733.htm>