

Providing Effective Interpretive Services to Emerging Indigenous People From Oaxaca

RON MORTENSON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Monterey County was recently faced with providing translation services to a group of people from Oaxaca, Mexico. The dilemma was that there are several languages specific to various regions of Oaxaca and there were limited interpreters available. Furthermore, the resources available were extremely costly. Efforts were made to seek advice from the State of California which mandates that interpretation must be provided in a customer's native tongue, but the state had little information to share. Other counties and organizations were consulted to ascertain best practices for dealing effectively with emerging populations that did not speak English.

Findings

Cultural competency for the employees dealing with this new population was seen as being the key to success. Cultural competency training teaches us to understand values, respect differences and respond appropriately to the needs and culture of the customer. Additionally relationships with local organizations proved to be instrumental for communicating effectively.

Conclusions

Implications and recommendations are as follows:

- The Cultural Competency model used by Santa Clara County could be further studied and emulated.
- Expanding relationships with local organizations is needed.
- Recruiting Oaxacan speaking employees is vital.

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Introduction

Monterey County faced a financial projection of needing to spend \$250,000 for a year of contracted interpretation services for the many languages spoken by people from Oaxaca, Mexico. Initial analysis indicated there were no quick solutions and that other California counties were faced with similar interpretation problems. This study explores how to provide mandated interpretation when there is a limited availability of qualified interpreters.

Background

The State of California requires all county welfare departments to provide free interpretation to social service customers in their native language (California DSS Div. 21, 2006). Typically, this is accomplished by having certified bilingual interpreters on staff, or through contracted services. Monterey County is experiencing a challenge in this area due to an emerging indigenous population of customers from the Mexican State of Oaxaca. People from Oaxaca began migrating to the United States in search of opportunity, higher paying work and better living conditions. Many have relocated to Monterey County, with a significant number settling in and around the town of Greenfield, because of the availability of work opportunities provided in the agriculture industry (Salinas Californian, 2007).

When the harvesting season ended, many families were left with limited amounts of food and shelter, so they turned to the Monterey County Department of Social and Employment Services (DSES) to provide these necessities. Monterey County has a social services client population of approximately 59%

monolingual Spanish speaking people at its King City offices, which serve the residents of Greenfield. Additionally, it was recently discovered that 12% of the customers in that service area are monolingual in the Oaxacan languages.

When these families from Oaxaca were initially interviewed, our workers attempted to communicate with them by speaking Spanish, which they assumed was appropriate for someone from Mexico. Unfortunately, we later realized that people from Oaxaca do not understand Spanish. Prevalent languages include Mixtec, Triqui and Zapotec, but there are literally thousands of languages spoken by a population that exceeds 3.5 million (Oaxaca Facts, 2006). When we occasionally managed to find someone to provide interpretation, their knowledge proved to be insufficient to deal with the scope of the language problem.

The Oaxacan culture is one of a proud people who smile often and nod their heads in an accepting and affirmative fashion, even when they do not understand. This leads to communication issues with much misunderstanding on both sides. Our social services customers from Oaxaca generally do not read or write, which has also caused confusion. The welfare system is very “forms-intensive,” but in a verbal-based community, there is little concept of forms or signatures. This difference led to further challenges as county employees attempted to do their jobs, while having to explain procedures that were culturally incomprehensible.

Unfortunately, the availability of Oaxacan language interpreters is minimal. The only current options are a few community volunteers, very limited yet expensive interpretation service providers, and

some translation from family members. The goal of this project is to find out how other counties have solved this dilemma, and, more importantly, to discover the best approach for obtaining necessary interpretation services for the Oaxacan people. It is hoped that by studying other county solutions that Monterey County may be able to absorb and apply information that others have learned, avail the county of identified resources and develop innovative and pro-active strategies to serve this unique population, while reducing costs.

Methodology

Initial discussions with representatives from the State of California indicated that Monterey County was providing the best service levels, when compared with the other counties currently dealing with this emerging population from Oaxaca. The decision was made to spend some time working with employees of Santa Clara County, as that county is known to have dealt with newly emerging population issues in the past. It was hoped that Monterey County could use similar templates for success that had been effectively utilized by Santa Clara County. Additionally, other counties in Northern California were queried to see how they effectively dealt with Oaxacan customers. Finally, discussions with local organizations were held to learn more about the Oaxacan culture.

Lessons Learned

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Santa Clara County has a very strong commitment to achieving cultural competency within their agency. Cultural competency is the ability of an individual or organization to understand and respect values, attitudes, beliefs and mores that differ across cultures, and to consider and respond appropriately to these differences (Dean, 1996). Many managers believe this is the key to providing effective interpretation for their customers. Enhancing cultural competency is recognized as a very effective approach to overcome the health & social disparities attributed to race and ethnicity (CBDIO, 2006).

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

As organizations and individuals attempt to become culturally competent, they must become students of culture. The Campinha-Bacote Cultural Competency Model indicates that people must move through the following phases:

- a Cultural Awareness,
- b Cultural Knowledge,
- c Cultural Encounter,
- d Cultural Skills, and
- e Cultural Desire.

Culture is defined as the sum of beliefs, practices, habits, likes, dislikes, norms, customs, rituals, and so forth that people learn from their families and years of socialization in their communities (Merriam-Webster, 2007). As employees understand and respect the culture of their customers, they will be better prepared to communicate with them. It is not just about interpreting words, it is about understanding the context of the words and the comprehension of the information by the people receiving the words.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

An important method for providing interpretation services to new populations is to reach out to the community leaders and have them help provide interpreters for those who need it. These can be religious or other cultural leaders who are respected in the community. An effective strategy has been to place these types of individuals on an approved interpreter list so that state requirements are more properly met. Another approach is to obtain the assistance of non-profit community organizations and/or agencies.

Also, Santa Clara County has established a strong association with the Mexican Consulate which has helped in developing the county's relationships with local community groups. Other agencies have experienced problems in attempting to hire interpreters who are then discovered to be undocumented immigrants. This issue will be overcome as succeeding generations fulfill citizenship requirements, but it is likely to remain a problem in the near future.

Current Achievements

Monterey County has already been successful in progressing forward with solutions to the interpretation challenge. In 2006, community organizations with volunteer interpreters for Zapotec, Mixtec, and Triqui languages joined with Monterey County DSES staff at a meeting for the Oaxacan indigenous community in an effort to increase awareness of bilingual and bi-cultural services to community members in need of social services. Regular community meetings have been scheduled in an effort to establish relationships and gain trust of the community members.

The Centro Binacional Para El Desarrollo Indigena Oaxaqueno, Inc. (Bi-national Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities, aka CBDIO), has been an excellent partner in this vital area for Monterey County. The county is currently in negotiations with CBDIO to put a contract in place for interpretation services. Additionally, both parties are discussing issues of mutual concern regarding increasing awareness of Oaxacan culture for county staff. Also, the King City office has identified caseworkers who are specifically assigned to Oaxacan caseloads in order to provide consistency. These workers are becoming specialists in the Oaxacan culture. Finally, we identified a contract source to provide translation services for one-half of the original cost projection, which will help alleviate some of the financial burden.

Conclusions

The Oaxacan people will continue to come to California for better living conditions, better wages, and overall stronger opportunities here. More counties will have to deal with the interpretation issues currently faced by Monterey and other California counties as this immigration continues. These challenges will force everyone involved to continue to search for creative ways to solve our interpretation issues.

Surprisingly, the information obtained through the research of this project did not provide any easy answers for immediately solving our interpretation problems for people from Oaxaca. Monterey County

has initiated the steps that need to be taken in order to provide effective interpretation services, and they need to continue to journey down this path. The county needs to increase knowledge of Oaxacan culture for all Monterey County employees, especially those who have Oaxacan caseloads. The Cultural Competency model used by Santa Clara County could be further studied and utilized as a template for Monterey County to adopt. We need to seek assistance from grassroots organizations and non-profit agencies to advocate and implement specific projects to meet our needs. The CBDIO has already been recognized as a leader in this arena, and work is in progress towards several potential solutions. Eventually, the county may need to recruit and employ individuals specifically to provide appropriate interpretive services for our Oaxacan customers. Funding for these activities will need to be absorbed in the training and recruitment budget as ongoing necessary expenses.

Success in all these areas will help alleviate the current financial challenge by reducing the county's reliance on utilizing contracted services for Oaxacan translation purposes. Monterey County may also choose to maintain its leadership role in this arena by helping to provide advice and assistance to other counties as well as the State of California.

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