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Woodland police chief breaks language barrier - electronically

Lance Martin

Herald Senior Staff Writer

WOODLAND - Woodland Police Chief Don Ryan is trying to break the language barrier.

He is doing this with the help of a new piece of equipment.

Ryan purchased a \$950 Ectaco translator with funds from a \$11,111.11 N.C. Crime Control and Public Safety grant to help Spanish-speaking people understand police instructions.

The handheld device, which stores up to 4,000 phrases, wasn't available for purchase when Ryan stumbled across it on the Internet while looking for Spanish phrases in November.

He contacted the company and was allowed to use it on a 30-day trial basis. He's not going to send it back, he said.

"This is really going to be a good asset," he said. "I'm going to carry it in my car."

Ryan began seriously considering how to tackle the language problem following a recent hit and run he investigated involving a non-English speaking Hispanic driver.

"I don't know Spanish," he said. "It was difficult to communicate."

With the Ectaco, Ryan can speak into the device and say, "Freeze! Don't move!" and the phrase will come through in Spanish. If he wants a person to put up their hands, he can speak that phrase into the device and out it comes in Spanish.

Miranda rights are in the machine and Ryan can control it to read the entire Miranda warning or go section by section.

Phrases covering almost every police situation imaginable are programmed into the device. There are areas covering assault, rape, robberies and break-ins.

Using the device's programmable capabilities, Ryan is working on putting instructions on town ordinance violations in the device with the help of a Spanish-speaking friend.

If he uses the machine to ask questions, Ryan, through the machine, will tell the person to write their answers out. "It's really going to make it a heck of lot easier," he said. "Everything is here. Who? What? When? Where? And why?"