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Fort Valley breaks language barrier with translating tool

By Becky Purser
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FORT VALLEY - The city's police department has a new law enforcement tool that translates English to Spanish in an effort to clear the language barrier and communicate with the Hispanic community.

The electronic device - an ECTACO SpeechGuard PD-4 - looks much like a handheld, electronic day planner complete with a stylus and a touch screen. But what it does is spit out 3,000 typical police commands and phrases in Spanish at the touch of the stylus.

The translator also understands common police terms and commands spoken in English. An officer can speak into the translator in English and the translator will speak the command in Spanish.

For Fort Valley Police Chief Jan Cary, the translator gives his officers an edge in police work. Most of his officers do not speak Spanish, and many in Fort Valley's Hispanic community do not speak English, Cary said.

Now, officers can at least use the translator to speak commands and phrases.

For example, at a traffic accident with injuries, Cary said the officer can ask the person in Spanish through the translator if she or he is injured and where. In a traffic stop, a button can be pushed and the person is asked in Spanish for his or her identification, Cary said. The person can at least hand the officer identification or write the information out by hand, he said. The list of practical applications goes on and on. But the down side, Cary readily acknowledged, is that translator cannot translate Spanish into English.

"I would be foolish to think it would solve every problem that we have," Cary said. "But it's part of building that trust and bond in the Hispanic community."

When an officer makes an effort to speak the person's language, often that results in the person trying to speak back in English, Cary said. That small measure of respect offered to the Hispanic person can open up lines of communication that might not materialize had the effort not been made, he said.

Also, many of police commands and phrases require simple yes or no answers and gestures. "At least we can ask, 'Which way did the bad guy go?' And they can point," Cary said.

However, there is a logistical problem with the device in Fort Valley, Cary said. The department has only one translator, so the officer who carries it is always on call, and for the time being, that officer is the chief himself. But Cary said he's glad to do it, and it's not uncommon for the chief of a small department to go on routine calls.

So far, in the three weeks he's had the \$950 device, Cary said he's been able to use it only twice - once during a routine traffic stop, and another time when someone came into the police station for help, he said.

Each time, the translator did its job and helped police communicate with Spanish-speaking persons, Cary said.

Cary said he expects he'll get much more use from the translator as time goes on. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that in 2003, 4.2 percent of Peach County's population was Hispanic. But Cary said he expects the percentage is much higher with illegal aliens likely not counted.

Cary said the translator is a good investment for a small department where learning to speak Spanish may not be practical.

He said he cannot afford to lose the manpower for his officers to take short courses that may produce only elementary phrases in Spanish, nor can he compensate his officers for language specialities learned through more comprehensive course work.

As a result, the translator is a bargain, he said.

"For a small department, that (\$950) is a major investment. But if it helps us with one person, I think it's money well spent," Cary said.

The SpeechGuard PD-4, which debuted this year, is manufactured by ECTACO, a New York-based company that develops and designs electronic dictionaries and translators in more than 50 languages, said Tim Houston, ECTACO's director of business development.

The PD-4, which is designed for law enforcement agencies, came out of a project that the company was commissioned to do for the military last year, Houston said. That project developed a translator in Arabic called the GI-4, he said.

"There was quite a buzz created by the GI-4," he said.

The company was flooded with requests for translators for police, fire departments, emergency rooms, hospitals and private security companies, Houston said.

The PD-4, which is programmed in the most-requested languages of Spanish, Arabic and Russian, is considered the Cadillac of the company's products because officers may speak into the device and it speaks back in Spanish, Houston said.

Officers have to learn common phrases that the translator uses, he said. "If the officer says, 'Can I have a cup of coffee?' the unit is not going to respond to that because it does not have that content within its text. But if the officer says, 'You were stopped for speeding,' the unit will recognize that," Houston said.

Also, the translator can be adjusted to recognize the voice of an officer who has a thick accent or speech impediment, Houston said.

Since the PD-4 debuted in August and a revamped version in November, 23 law enforcement agencies in the United States now deploy them, including the Duluth (Ga.) Police Department, Houston said. An additional 60 departments, including Fort Valley police, are using the translator on a 30-day trial period, he said.

The trial period for testing and evaluation requires police agencies to submit payment in full, which is held for the trial period, and if the agencies elect not to keep the device, they send it back and receive a full refund, Cary said.

Col. Brian Carney, Duluth's deputy chief, said the department purchased one SpeechGuard PD-4, which was modified to also include two additional languages of Mandarin Chinese and Korean to reflect the diverse Atlanta-area community the department serves.

"Our population is getting larger and larger with an increasingly international flavor, and we don't want to be behind the times," Carney said.

For Cary, he's sold on the translator. "It's a keeper," he said.

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