

THE NATION; A town confronts its language barrier; With federal help -- and prodding -- Mattawa, Wash., tries to accommodate the 90% of residents who speak Spanish. Los Angeles Times May 25, 2008 Sunday

Copyright 2008 Los Angeles Times
All Rights Reserved
Los Angeles Times

May 25, 2008 Sunday
Home Edition

SECTION: MAIN NEWS; National Desk; Part A; Pg. 20

LENGTH: 989 words

HEADLINE: THE NATION;

A town confronts its language barrier;

With federal help -- and prodding -- Mattawa, Wash., tries to accommodate the 90% of residents who speak Spanish.

BYLINE: Stuart Glascock, Times Staff Writer

DATELINE: MATTAWA, WASH

BODY:

. -- Nearly everyone in this small farming community in eastern Washington speaks Spanish -- nearly everyone except those in city government and the Police Department, where English is spoken.

And almost everyone who speaks one language does not speak the other.

That language barrier has engulfed the community, which has grown over the last 20 years from 300 to about 3,200 year-round residents. Nine out of 10 Mattawa residents speak Spanish at home, and 8 out of 10 adults speak English "less than very well," according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

The Columbia River basin community, surrounded by miles of fruit orchards and vineyards, has tried to deal with its language barrier informally.

From the first gas station to the last retail shop, signs advertise goods and services in Spanish and English. The tiny library offers bilingual story time for families.

For years, police often relied on bystanders to translate at crime scenes. City

administrators grabbed bilingual speakers as ad hoc interpreters.

But the gap between an English-speaking city government and an overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking population has grown so wide that the federal government has stepped in to mandate that the city bridge the divide.

After a legal aid group filed a Civil Rights Act complaint, the U.S. Department of Justice worked with the city and Police Department to develop a language assistance plan.

Adopted in March, the plan is unique in Washington and is seen as a bellwether for cities with similar demographics. The plan requires Mattawa to employ at least one bilingual employee during regular business hours and to make vital information available in Spanish as well as English. It also requires the police to have qualified interpreters on call at all times.

For a long time, the Northwest Justice Project knew that Mattawa police did not speak Spanish and did not use interpreters, said Judith Lurie, senior attorney for the group, which launched the federal complaint.

Then a call for help in a domestic violence case focused the issue.

Mattawa police allowed the suspect to leave the scene to find someone to interpret, Lurie said. The man never returned. The police had tried to use the couple's children as interpreters, but they were too traumatized by the fighting. Their terrified mother drove them 60 miles to a safe house.

"Victims of domestic violence rely on the police to protect them," Lurie said. In Mattawa, "they were not being adequately protected because the police were not using interpreters to communicate."

Mattawa Mayor Judy Esser said the domestic violence case was unusual. Before the language agreement, police and city officials usually had someone around who could translate.

"We thought that was enough," she said.

The Justice Department said the town had to provide translation for people who aren't English-proficient.

In places that have a high percentage of monolingual Spanish speakers, that means all city services, including law enforcement, have to be available in Spanish.

Hiring bilingual police officers and city staffers costs money the town doesn't have, the mayor said. Mattawa employs one provisional officer and three full-time officers.

"We are in a huge competition with every city," Esser said. "It is tough to find bilingual

people, especially when the state patrol and county sheriff pay more."

Mattawa, about 130 miles southeast of Seattle, is not a wealthy place.

The town is wedged between the Yakima Training Center Military Reservation and the U.S. Department of Energy Hanford Site. During harvest season, the town's population nearly doubles with migrant farmworkers. They journey hundreds or thousands of miles to pick the region's apples, pears and cherries.

The local government struggles with growing pains and has a limited tax base.

More than half of the property owners don't pay taxes because they are subsidized or nonprofits.

Esser called the growth of farmworker housing "much needed" but a strain on other systems and services.

The streets are lined with prefabricated houses and rundown mobile homes.

Chain stores and fast-food restaurants bypassed the town. Immigrants can find authentic meals from their home countries at El Jato, El Caribe, La Popular, La Parilla, Rallito de Luna and La Maravita.

Satellite TV beams in Spanish-language news and soap operas.

The Catholic Diocese of Yakima Housing Services operates low-income housing in Mattawa. The state's migrant council runs a child development center that has a long waiting list. Residents point with pride to the new high school and community clinic.

Jose Fernandez manages an unusual migrant housing project: the Esperanza, a village of 40 reconstructed cargo containers. Six people squeeze into each unit. Families pay \$10 per day; singles, \$3.

Fernandez sees Mattawa Police on patrol regularly, and he gives them credit.

"They relate. They work with the people," he said. "They do their job."

Maria Belen Ledezma, a 35-year resident who works in agricultural services for the state's employment office in Mattawa, says the police should work harder to resolve the language barrier.

"How would [Spanish-only speakers] understand what law enforcement is requesting? If they are stopped, how would they know what their rights are?" she asked.

Jim Desler commutes from Ellensburg, 46 miles away, to teach migrant workers English through a community college extension program. He doesn't see a huge divide between

town officials and the immigrants.

"I've never heard any complaints about access to city services or the Police Department," he said.

Former Mattawa City Councilwoman Blanca Fernandez recently moved to Yakima, though she still works in town. She sometimes serves as a translator for the Mattawa Police Department.

"There has been an effort to deal with the language issues," she said.

"We live in such a rural area. It's a hard labor pool. Things are getting better. People are trying to fix things."

--

stuart.glascock@latimes.com

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: WORKING ON IT: Maybeline Pantleon is a new bilingual receptionist at Mattawa Town Hall, hired under an agreement with the Justice Department. A legal aid group had filed a Civil Rights Act complaint; the town didn't provide formal language services. PHOTOGRAPHER:Kris Holland Yakima Herald-Republic

LOAD-DATE: May 25, 2008 