

Atlantic City police build trust, understanding by speaking residents' languages

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ATLANTIC CITY — At Boom Food Market on Ventnor Avenue on Wednesday afternoon, Police Officer Autumn Mason stood with Margarita Rivera, a cashier at the store, and had a conversation with her in Spanish.

“There are times that you might not have the right word and I’ll switch to English, but people are pretty understanding of that and so appreciative that you’re even trying to talk to them in their language,” Mason said.

That conversation was one small instance of something that’s going on all over the city each day — police officers who speak 22 languages across the department are communicating with the residents they serve in their native languages, whether it’s during traffic stops, calls for service, the filing of reports, or even just navigating City Hall.

In a city where there are more than two dozen languages spoken in the school system alone, it’s a skill that officers use to navigate cultural differences and build trust.

The store, which sells produce and pantry staples labeled in English and Spanish, is a hub for the 5th Ward community made up primarily of Spanish and Middle Eastern language speakers, where Mason serves in the Neighborhood Coordination Unit, a community policing effort that puts two officers on the beat in each political ward.

“We see everybody like family,” Rivera said, explaining that it’s helpful when officers can communicate in other languages, because it cuts down on confusion and, sometimes, fear in residents. “They keep everybody safe.”

Mason’s partner, Officer Syed Shah, speaks three other languages besides English — Urdu, Punjabi and Pushto — languages spoken in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, respectively.

“We’ve been teaching each other things,” Mason said. “He has me saying things in Urdu, and he’s been saying things in Spanish and people are so happy with it.”

Shah learned to speak English as a student at Richmond Avenue School, he explained, after coming to the U.S. more than 30 years ago. It was his fourth language.

Across the schools in the resort, students speak more than two dozen languages, according to the superintendent’s office. Those languages range from Albanian, Arabic and Bengali, to Creole, Portuguese and Vietnamese, and many more.

“But it’s not just about speaking the language,” Shah said. “It’s understanding the culture.”

Two years ago, Shah stopped a car that was going the wrong way down a one-way street, he said. The man got out of the car and started walking toward Shah. His backup instinctively put his hand on his service weapon. But Shah realized what was going on and diffused the situation.

“Back home, when you get pulled over by a cop, you have to get out and walk toward a cop,” he said. “It’s just a cultural difference, and you have to realize that.”

Residents can be intimidated by police, but when they’re able to communicate in their first language, it can build trust during a high-stress situation, said Officer Jimmy Rodriguez of the accident investigations section.

“Hispanic people are generally a very family oriented people,” Rodriguez, who speaks Spanish fluently, said. “And even if they don’t know you and you’re speaking Spanish — their language — they put that wall down, and they tend to communicate with you directly because you’re speaking their language to them.”

At Food 4 Less on Atlantic Avenue, owner Muhammad Zia smiled when Shah walked in the door, and he began speaking to him quickly in Urdu as the pair shook hands.

“It’s so important,” Zia said. “The major thing is they understand our culture. They understand us.”

Knowing and being able to use other languages is another tool for officers to use on the job, Rodriguez said. But the community also needs to know that they can always request a translator, or an officer can call a language line if there’s no one available that can meet their needs.

“The community should know that just because you don’t speak English, that doesn’t say that you don’t get police services,” Rodriguez said. “You should be able to call for help and have the police department or someone help you out in our language if you need it. We’ll do the best we can.”