

OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Enhancing Access to County Services for All Residents

Berrien County, Michigan

Challenge: 20 percent of Americans are now bilingual or multilingual.

Solution: The county board approved a three-year contract with Voiance Language Services LLC, a subsidiary of CyraCom LLC, to provide 24/7 on-demand, over-the-phone language interpretation services.



As counties become increasingly diverse, there has been a significant rise in the number of languages spoken within communities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 20 percent of Americans are now bilingual or multilingual. As county residents engage with local government services, language barriers can present a challenge when accessing essential resources, such as scheduling appointments, obtaining documents, seeking information or registering for events. While counties work diligently at the local level to address these



barriers, a gap still exists between the services provided by county governments and the needs of multilingual populations.

To better serve all residents, counties can invest in programs that allow individuals to select their preferred language when interacting with county services. Counties will need to implement training programs for local staff, equipping them with the skills to interpret and communicate with residents in their native languages, ensuring residents are connected to the right resources and services. Another approach is for counties to establish partnerships with local community organizations or language service providers to offer in-person interpretation services. Lastly, they can implement surveys to better understand what other resources multi-language speakers have limited access to.

In July 2024, Berrien County, Michigan took a proactive step in addressing a critical challenge for residents calling 9-1-1. Non-English-speaking residents often faced delays when trying to connect with an interpreter, slowing down emergency response times. To resolve this issue, the county board approved a three-year contract with Voiance Language Services LLC, a subsidiary of CyraCom LLC, to provide 24/7 on-demand, over-the-phone language interpretation services. This partnership has significantly improved the response time for dispatchers and callers in emergency situations by ensuring language barriers are quickly overcome. By partnering with this new service provider, Berrien County has been able to reduce connection times to interpreters, enhancing overall service delivery during critical moments. Furthermore, this program has provided a more efficient and inclusive emergency services system, which helps save lives and ensure all residents receive the timely help they need in moments of crisis.

To learn more about how Berrien County is addressing language barriers in emergency services, listen to our latest podcast episode. We take a deeper dive into the steps the county has taken to improve 9-1-1 response times and how this partnership with Voiance Language Services is making a difference for non-English speaking residents. Click here to hear from county representatives about the positive impact this initiative is having on language-barriers, public safety and community well-being.

