

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IS A

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# SUPERPOWER

SERVING RESIDENTS WITH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

- KATIE HEDRICK'S "OFFICE OF ONE" DELIVERS COMMUNITY TRUST
- SETTING UP THE CITY OF ROANOKE'S BILINGUAL INCENTIVE PAY
- IMPACT OF SERVING IN CITY RESIDENTS' PREFERRED LANGUAGES
- *AND SO MUCH MORE!*

Katie Hedrick, the Community Inclusion Coordinator of the City of Roanoke's Community Engagement department in Virginia, was tasked with developing and implementing a Bilingual Incentive Pay Program to address the concerns and needs of their diverse 100,000 residents. "Our bilingual employees are using their language skills in a lot of different ways, and we think it's so important for employees that are in public safety departments get tested, such as the sheriff's office, fire, EMS, and police. When individuals receive our help in-language, and in a way that they understand, it makes a huge difference, especially in urgent or life and death situations," she explained.



She spearheaded the Bilingual Incentive Pay Program for the city's Language Access Program by herself. At first, identifying the right language proficiency testing partner, was overwhelming. "I didn't realize what I was going into, and it just seemed like a whole lot of legwork on my end, and I've had the completely opposite experience with LTI," she shared. For 30 years, Language Testing International (LTI) has been a trusted language testing provider for federal, state, and local government agencies. As the exclusive licensee of ACTFL language proficiency assessments, LTI delivers valid and legally defensible language tests in over 120 languages. Scheduling tests is easy and through LTI's secure remote proctoring service, test-takers can complete the assessments anywhere and at any time that is convenient to them. "I saw that LTI was used and recommended by local and state governments, and even the federal government, and that was a key factor for me. Knowing that it was beneficial for these agencies and that LTI exercised best practices made them the ideal partner for us," Katie added.

With LTI's help, the City of Roanoke determined that bilingual employees should have an Advanced level of language proficiency to be eligible for Bilingual Incentive Pay. The Advanced proficiency certification verifies that the employee is indeed equipped with the skills required to perform their job in a language other than English. It is a similar process to when the city verifies other skills such as driving a bus or truck.

All the languages needed by the City of Roanoke are available for testing through LTI. Katie's LTI representative showed her how to schedule the language proficiency tests online, and she receives the proficiency scores of bilingual employees within 48 hours or less. "They [test-takers] set up their laptops in our HR Learning Center, they have a headset with a microphone, they put in their password, and they test. We've had test-takers from the police department, everyone from patrol officers to detectives, parks and recreations, the facilities department, people from our fire and EMS departments. So, just a wide variety of individuals," Katie stated. A Spanish-speaking police officer told her that he had always used his bilingual skills because he had a heart for servicing their community. He also expressed his gratitude towards the City of Roanoke for recognizing, through additional compensation, that being able to communicate with the large number of Hispanic residents who prefer to speak in their language is indeed extra work that should be compensated.

The City of Roanoke will begin recruiting more bilingual candidates realizing that the Bilingual Incentive Pay is very attractive to job seekers. More importantly, Katie stresses how important it is for her community that more city employees look like the individuals and families they serve.



"I think, for me, what's been more impactful is the trust that's being developed. A lot of our residents are coming from other countries. They come from places with not so reliable public safety departments, and it's important that they understand that our officers or 9-1-1 dispatchers are here to help," Katie emphasized. "Having bilingual employees who can physically answer a call or drive the ambulance to the hospital and are able to speak in that language to connect with those residents, that has been the most impactful piece of this. Developing that trust, making those connections between local government that sometimes isn't trustworthy in the place you're coming from, and letting them know that in fact, we are trustworthy and we're taking the steps to make sure that we are communicating and helping in the way that's more impactful and beneficial for our families and the residents that are here in our city."