

Wade Calhoun introduces a voluntary organization that breaks down language barriers when disaster strikes

Communicating in a Crisis

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

Homes were destroyed, families were displaced and federal agencies were called to respond. The Vietnamese community (amongst many others) not only suffered tremendous losses but faced significant obstacles as a result of the language barrier between their community and the officials responding to the disaster. Volunteers were needed to assist federal agencies and humanitarian organizations at disaster sites to interpret, translate, and direct victims.

In 2004, a tsunami assaulted South and Southeast Asia. Lives were lost and livelihoods were destroyed. Volunteers were needed to work side-by-side with USAID and U.S. military personnel to ease the devastation faced by many coastal nations.

These situations represent examples of how the National Language Service Corps (NLSC) can assist federal agencies in language and cultural interactions during times of emergency or need, domestically and internationally. This new organization is now operating a pilot to test its ability to assist federal agencies in language and cultural preparedness when the need arises. Upon completion of the pilot, the NLSC stands to serve as the first fully operational federal program that has on-call language volunteers available to use their language skills to serve the government and those in need.

The NLSC anticipates charter members fulfilling assignments in everyday situations as well. So far in 2009, the NLSC has participated in two exercise scenarios with both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC). In March, three charter members were sent to Atlanta, Georgia, and assisted with document translation for a website and provided cultural expertise in Mandarin Chinese, Russian, and Marshallese. Three months later, three Indonesian language specialists traveled to volunteer in Jakarta, Indonesia, taking on humanitarian and tactical assignments with the U.S. Army Pacific

Command. All volunteers made an impact during the few weeks of their assignments.

Volunteers on assignments receive financial compensation including travel and per diem for their time on the assignment. Additionally, the NLSC members chosen for assignments become temporary federal employees and receive a modest salary.

The NLSC provides a unique opportunity for charter members to get involved and help communities facing language barriers. Many volunteer for the personal satisfaction of knowing that they are helping someone, but the NLSC also offers some members, based on potential assignments, training, certification, and skill enhancement opportunities. Further, members become a part of a service-oriented network and connect via Facebook, Twitter, and NLSC's own communications portal. These sites are used as vehicles to connect volunteers, announce opportunities and upcoming events. Ultimately, these networks will help the NLSC gauge the interest among its language volunteers and their willingness to connect with service-minded individuals.

The program is currently recruiting speakers of ten languages — Mandarin Chinese, Hausa, Hindi, Indonesian, Marshallese, Russian, Somali, Swahili, Thai, and Vietnamese — to enroll as charter members, a title given to the first 1,000 volunteers.

NLSC is part of the 2005 National Security Language Initiative to advocate the learning and integration of critical languages into education and workforce opportunities.

Charter members must be U. S. Citizens who are 18 years or older, have language expertise, and are motivated to help their fellow citizens throughout the nation and world. For further information, visit www.nlscorps.org. ❧

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