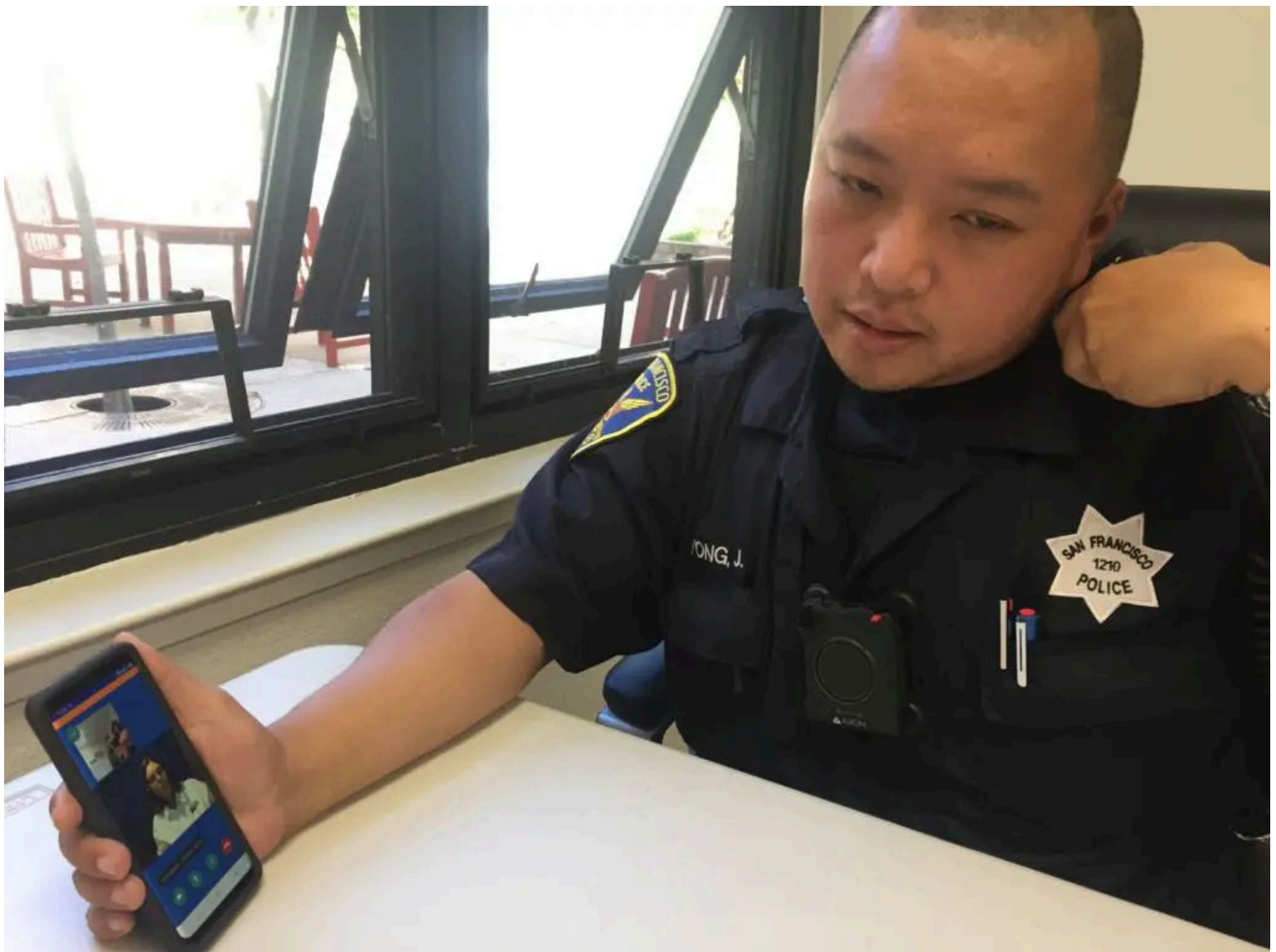


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# 'Hello, Officer': The SFPD's efforts to speak your language are both high-tech and low-tech



by **JULIAN MARK**  
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Office Johnny Vong tests the Portuguese of the Language Line interpreter at his temporary office at 500 Raymond in Visitacion Valley. Photo by Julian Mark

On a recent Tuesday at a Visitacion Valley senior center, Officer Johnny Vong sat tucked away in what was, by all appearances, a utility closet. But Vong was not sitting a spell to dodge his normal police duties. The small room at 500 Raymond, not far from McLaren Park, was, in fact, his office — at least, for two hours that day.

“The main mission is to bring the police to the people instead of expecting people to come to us,” Vong said.

An elderly resident of John King Senior Facility poked her head in and said something to Vong in Taishanese — a southern China dialect, Vong said, that is spoken by most of Visitacion Valley’s Chinese residents. They make up more than half the neighborhood’s population.

“She just offered me lunch,” he said.

One police officer behind a foldout table at a senior center may not look like the most advanced breakthrough in community policing, but the Ingleside District — which partially encompasses Visitacion Valley and Sunnydale, neighborhoods at the southeastern fringe of the city — is one of the few stations experimenting with placing officers in communities less comfortable with visiting a police station.

Vong said that, while residents of the facility were at first suspicious of him, once he began speaking to them in Taishanese, “they crowded me.”

For the first week, he saw residents conveying small complaints — almost being bitten by a dog, or hit by a bicycle. “It was a lot of education about what you should do,” he said. But now, residents come to him with more serious reports — like robberies.

“If it was up to me, I’d probably have one [outpost] in every district and then have two officers that can speak the major languages if possible,” said Vong, who speaks Taishanese, Cantonese, Portuguese, Spanish and a little bit of Mandarin.

Luckily for the San Francisco Police Department members who don’t know how to speak five different languages — i.e. *most of them* — there’s an app for that.

## **A low-tech approach to high-tech**

If an officer does not know how to speak a person’s language, he or she can select from a menu of more than 240 languages on the “Language Line” app. In seconds, an interpreter will appear on the officer’s smartphone, ready to translate. Even Vong, who doesn’t know how to speak Tagalog, Russian or Arabic, said he finds

himself using the app around 10 times during a normal shift. He keeps a computer with the software by his side during his office hours.

The push by the SFPD to break the language barrier in a city where 13 percent of households speak no English (21 percent of those are Spanish-speaking and 37 percent are Chinese-speaking) has become a priority. In the past, the lack of translation technology or bilingual officers has left community members feeling powerless to report crimes or explain themselves if an officer suspects they've committed a crime.

Last March, a Spanish-speaking domestic violence victim to whom the SFPD refused to offer an interpreter and subsequently arrested following alleged abuse by her partner, settled a lawsuit with the city for \$50,000. The situation highlighted deficiencies in the department's language access programs.

Two recent Mission District police shooting victims — Amilcar Perez-Lopez and Luis Gongora Pat — were monolingual Spanish speakers. In both cases, officers did not use Spanish in the commands they gave to the men before the shootings.

Moreover, three of the five policy recommendations in a 2018 Department of Police Accountability report, which drew on citizen complaints, concerned language access issues.

But SFPD seems, now, to be responding to these complaints, albeit slowly. Starting in December 2018, the Ingleside Station was the first to test the Language Line app. Mission, Central, and Taraval stations soon followed. Unlike its previous version, in which an interpreter was merely called on the phone that was passed between an officer and subject, the app allows for a more intimate experience that also provides translation services for the deaf.

Out of the 2,300 SFPD officers, 364 have been certified to speak a language other than English, with more members being informally multilingual, according to an SFPD spokesperson.

Before a basic version of Language Line was introduced to officers, Vong would be called across to the city for his language skills. "I've had to go to the Richmond," he said — five miles away from the Ingleside District. The app now provides an automated version of gifted officers like Vong.

### **The fine line between 'permission' and 'consent'**

Police Commissioner Petra DeJesus is the commission's representative on the department's Language Access Working Group, which has been meeting for the last seven years. She said she appreciates the progress the department has made in breaking language barriers. But there still are "a lot of issues," she said.

Namely, Language Line does not always correctly interpret street jargon and terms of art within the department such as distinguishing between “permission” and “consent.”

“There’s no uniformity, so we’re trying to talk to [Language Line] about getting uniformity,” she said, explaining that much of the company’s services focus on medical and legal environments, not policing. She said she’s met with representatives at Language Line in an attempt to form the app’s services to policing.

David Rand, an associate professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, said that police being able to communicate in a person’s first language is crucial for enhancing an officer’s legitimacy. He and his team released a [study](#) that indicated even the most minute positive interactions can boost trust in police officers.

And yet, Rand noted in an email that an officer can still be “disrespectful, unhelpful, or abusive in any language.”

Disrespect and abuse, however, aren’t on Officer Johnny Vong’s agenda. A couple of days after his office hours stint, he dropped by The Village Community Facility at 1099 Sunnydale, a city-run community services center. Vong, standing by the entrance, made himself visible and greeted the elderly as they filed in.

A food bank was distributing groceries, and as dozens of seniors swarmed tables of melons, potatoes and cereal boxes, Vong struck up conversations with those waiting their turn, toggling between Taishanese, Cantonese, Spanish and English.



Office Johnny Vong speaks to community members at 1099 Sunnydale, as they file in for a food bank. Photo by Julian Mark

[clear]

Low Chau, a small woman with a handcart, was among the seniors. She told Mission Local, speaking Cantonese through Vong, that she's felt safer lately, but wondered, were something to happen, whether Vong was going to be present every week. "Having cops here means it's going to be safer," she said.

Ronald Colthirst, the community facility manager at 1099 Sunnydale, said the on-site office hours program came about in response to some "community violence issues that erupted and made the newspaper." He was referring to [a January attack](#) of an 89-year-old at Visitation Valley Playground.

"It caused a lot of concern throughout the neighborhood, and people were advocating to their public officials and police department that more needs to be done in terms of public safety," Colthirst, a Department of Public

Health employee, said.

Visitacion Valley's population is composed of roughly 60 percent Asian-Pacific Islanders (API), 19 percent Latinx, 14 percent African Americans, and 5 percent whites, according to a 2017 Department of Public Health Report.

Colthirst said that many of the Asian-Pacific Islander and Latinx populations are immigrants who know only their own languages fluently. "That really drives the need for police staff that can speak to the diversity of our community, especially in Chinese and Spanish."

## **The language of the Mission**

Like Visitacion Valley, the Mission District has a large population of residents who don't primarily speak English. The population in District 9 — which includes the Mission, Bernal Heights and the Portola — is roughly 46 percent white, 35 percent Latinx, 25 percent Asian Pacific Islander, 20 percent "other" and 4 percent African American, according to a [2018 Department of Public Health report](#).

Of Mission Station's roughly 160 officers, only 27 speak fluent Spanish, three speak Cantonese, one speaks Mandarin, one speaks Russian, one speaks Tagalog, and one speaks Italian, according to Mission Station Captain Gaetano Caltagirone.

"The front office also has Police Service aides ... that speak numerous languages, with a bigger percentage of Spanish-speaking [aides]," he said. "If for some reason there is no available officer to assist with a specific language, the officers are able to use the Language Line" app.

Until the station gets more Spanish speakers, this app would seem to be of use here in the Mission. And while Mission Station officers were one of the first four groups to be equipped with the video app on their phones, the station's leadership has not yet moved to establish in-person office hours at community meeting places with bilingual officers, as is being done in the Central, Taraval and Ingleside districts.

And more communication, especially with put-upon non-English speakers, can't be bad.

Rand, the MIT professor, said that during his research, he and his team observed an officer's interaction with a Spanish-speaking family of undocumented immigrants in New Haven, Conn. Members of the family told the officer that, weeks earlier, an older man tried to abduct their daughter at a playground near the complex, but they did not call the police because they feared deportation.

The officer explained in Spanish that the New Haven Police Department did not cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, as New Haven is a “sanctuary city,” like San Francisco. Rand said that many undocumented immigrants might be unaware of a city’s sanctuary policies.

“We don’t want negative stigmas towards law enforcement or language barriers to prevent people from reporting incidents,” Vong said. “We’re a lot more effective when the community comes to us.”

“I’ve had so many cases that were solved because a member of a community came up to me and said: ‘Officer, this is what I saw.’”



**Ben Kincannon**

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