

Justice Department Audits New York Police Interaction with Non-English Speakers

Are language barriers playing a role in law enforcement? The Justice Department has begun a “routine audit” in New York to determine whether federal civil rights laws were being complied with in police dealing with non-English speakers. Such reviews have been regular since 2002 when the Justice Department required recipients of grants to provide services to non-English speakers.

The purpose of this audit, according to an April 7 Office for Civil Rights letter, is to “learn more about whether language barriers have affected the interaction [with] N.Y.P.D. officers in the context of traffic stop, emergency and nonemergency telephone calls, interrogations, investigations, arrests, booking and intake, crime prevention activities, community outreach, interaction in precinct lobbies and filing complaints.”

In recent years, New York has taken various steps to comply with the Justice Department, including recruiting in foreign language newspapers, and those who speak foreign languages are given preference on civil service hiring lists. Additionally, Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed Executive Order 120, which created a language access plan to guarantee immigrants a meaningful ability to take advantages of police services.

Office of Justice Programs Website:

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/about/offices/ocr.htm>

New York Police Department Language Access Plan:

http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/public_information/nypd_language_access_plan_042009.pdf