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Leggett signs language access executive order

County officials working to tear down language barriers

by Andre L. Taylor | Staff Writer

Foreign-born Montgomery County residents will see changes in the information produced by county agencies within the next three months.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) signed the Executive Order on Language Access, which requires county agencies to translate important documents into other languages such as Spanish, Korean, Mandarin for Chinese and French, which are the four most spoken languages in the county other than English, said Lily Qi, community liaison and language access coordinator. Databases with important county documents are being created in the four languages for the county's Web site, she said.

Qi said she is not sure when the site will be updated with the translated information.

"We needed a system of accountability, awareness and efficiency," Qi said. "We have a very long way to go, but we're on the right path."

Dozens of residents who immigrated to the county attended the signing at the Upcounty Regional Services Center. Informing the public of the county's strides to knock down language barriers is the next step with the order, Qi said.

The county's police department has started changing its approach to the growing diverse population by training officers to be patient with non-English speaking residents, Qi said. More than 10 percent of the county's immigrant residents have limited English proficiency, she said.

Since 1990, Germantown has seen the largest growth in foreign-born residents of anywhere in the county, Qi said. Using information from 1990 to 2000, Qi said Germantown has seen its immigrant population increase 140 percent. More than 36 percent of the 100,000 plus households in the upcounty were foreign-born or had a foreign spouse living in the home, according to a 2005 Census Update.

Montgomery County Police Officer Barry Collier said his agency is confronted with language barriers on a daily basis, forcing them to train their officers for a changing population.

Of the department's more than 1,100 officers, more than 100 are bilingual, with fluency in Spanish, Greek, Russian and some even know sign language, Collier said. Collier, an instructor at the police training academy, said officers are trained to speak slowly to

people who may not understand English. Officers are also trained to use contact cards kept in their cruisers that list phone numbers of interpreters.

Training police officers to find ways to understand non-native English speakers should increase positive relationships in those communities, Collier said. "The better we can communicate, the better we can avoid those pitfalls of miscommunication," he said. "It's our goal to eliminate language barriers. The only way to do that is to train our officers to work with all of the communities we serve."