

Ledger - Enquirer (Columbus, GA)

March 4, 2005

Interpreters Just a Call Away on New Police Cell Phones

Cricket donates Cell Phones, Tower Time to Police

By Kelli Esters, Staff Writer

The Columbus Police Department and Cricket Communications have teamed up to help relieve language barriers in the community, especially with the Hispanic population, by ensuring that officers are on-call to help as interpreters.

“There is a need to communicate with people in the community,” Columbus police Chief Ricky Boren said Thursday. “We feel this addresses this need.”

The telecommunications company donated seven cellular phones with unlimited local and long distance airtime, chargers, hands-free sets, and all cell phone features such as voicemail. Boren said officers will be able to keep the phones free of charge, as long as they are available 24-hours daily, seven-days-a-week for interpreting purposes. There are 10 bilingual sworn officers on the force, one of whom is proficient in seven languages. There are also bilingual support staff.

“We feel this will further open a direct line of communication for those who can’t effectively speak the English language,” Boren said.

Cricket Columbus marketing manager Jamie Amerson said the company donated the phones and services because there is a need for the police and non-English speaking members of the community.

“We have an ethnically diverse customer base, and have been looking for programs to serve these segments of the population,” Amerson said.

Out of the 185,948 people who live in Muscogee County, 6,337 – or 3.4 percent – are Hispanic, according to 2002 Census estimates. Councilor Mimi Woodson said the interpreter program is a great idea.

“This is a good way in showing the Columbus Police Department cares,” Woodson said. “I’m proud as a Latino in this community.”

Issa Marcano is a criminal records technician for the police department. During her eight-hour shift, she will hear a half-dozen calls over the police radios where someone is requesting an interpreter.

“The demand is continuous,” said Marcano, who also pitches in as an interpreter when needed in the Public Safety Center.

Carmen López is a retired Muscogee County teacher who also teaches a cultural awareness class to police officers.

“These phones are going to mean a lot by establishing a line of communication – a help line – between Latinos and the police department,” López said.

The phones have not been divided yet, but would go to sworn officers first and then non-sworn personnel, Boren said. The police department has been working with Cricket for more than a month to establish the program. In January, the department also began issuing pamphlets to officers to help with language barriers. The illustrated pamphlet gives directions or police commands in English and Spanish.

Copyright © 2005 Ledger-Enquirer and Wire Service Sources.