

Speaking their language

Suffolk PD aims to interact better with speakers of foreign tongues

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March 6 began for Acting Suffolk County Police Commissioner Stuart Cameron with an interview in English on a Spanish-language television outlet, where he touted the advances his department had made in working with foreign-language speakers.

Then he attended a meeting of the county legislature, where advocates for immigrants told lawmakers that his agency hadn't done enough to accommodate residents who don't speak English.

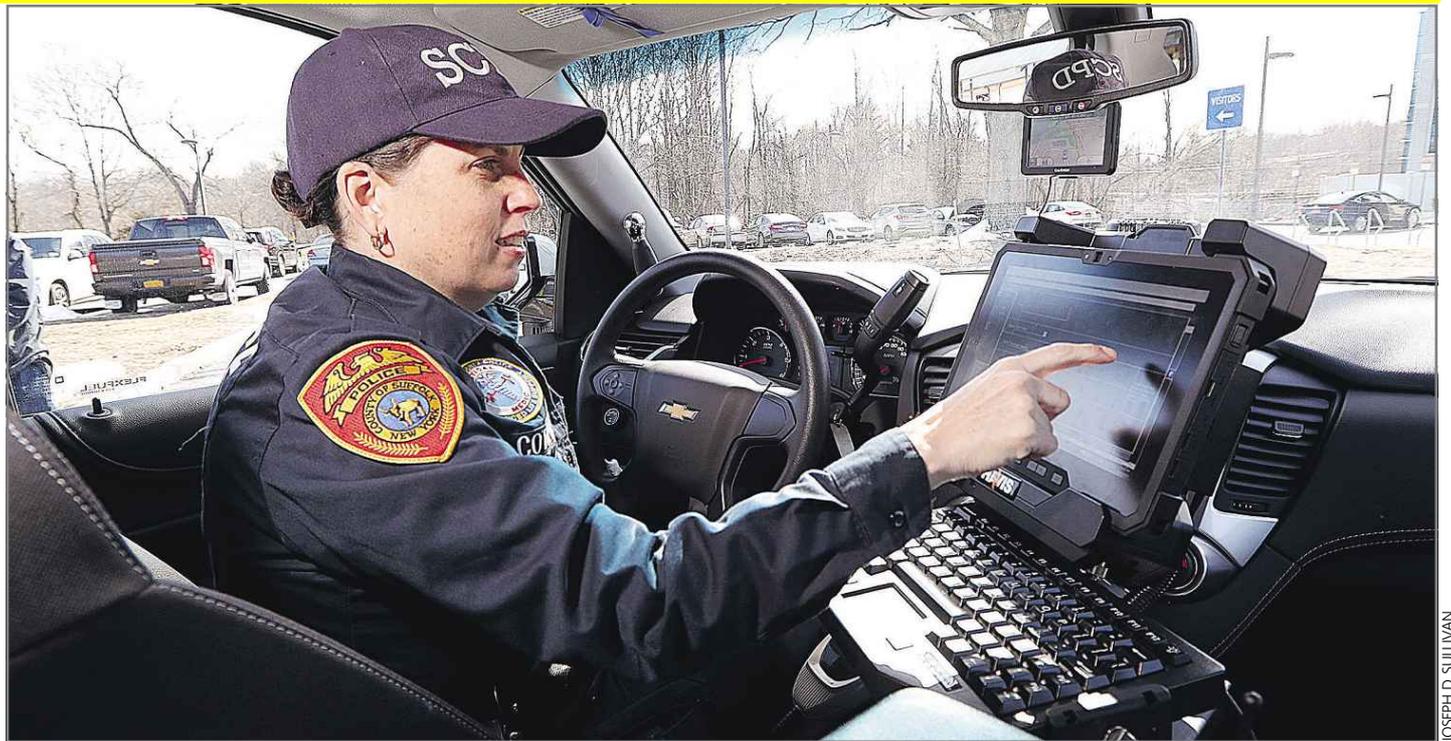
The criticism surprised Cameron, who had just recently announced that the Suffolk County Police Department plans to spend \$2.25 million over the next three years to equip 450 police vehicles with portable tablets that will give patrol officers instant access to translation services.

The department has used Language Line Services, a private company that provides telephone translation for more than 200 languages, since the late 1990s.

"We can't do our jobs if we can't communicate with people," Cameron said of the 2,500-officer department. "We've made a lot of advances in recent years but not all of that work is recognized, and my fear is people won't call us because they are afraid we are unable or unwilling to help."

Advocates for immigrants urged Suffolk County legislators this month to support a bill that would require police and other county agencies to provide translation services for residents who do not speak English.

The bill, which would codify a 2012 executive order issued by County Executive Steve Bellone that requires agencies to provide access to translation services, is necessary because county employees — including police officers — too often treat foreign-language speakers poorly, immigrants' advocates said.



Officer Kathy Cotter, assigned to the Fourth Precinct in Hauppauge, demonstrates a new tablet computer from her patrol vehicle.

In one instance, the advocates said, a Spanish-speaking woman reported that the person who answered the phone at the Seventh Precinct in Shirley called her by an expletive and told her to go back to her home country.

Cheryl Keshner, the coordinator for the Long Island Language Advocates Coalition and a community advocate with the Empire Justice Center — one of the critics at the March 6 meeting — said she understood Suffolk police have taken steps to improve language access but more needs to be done.

"I think there are people in the department who are trying to make it work, but it is not being implemented consistently," she said.

The U.S. Department of Justice, in its latest public report on the SCPD's 2014 settlement agreement with the federal government, released in June, said police had greatly improved aspects of its language access policy, particularly training, since the previous report was issued in January 2017.

Cameron said 97 percent of the force has received four hours of classroom instruction on language assistance.

But the Justice Department said SCPD has only partly complied in other areas, in-



Cameron: "We can't do our jobs if we can't communicate."

cluding consultation with the Latino community.

Suffolk police agreed to provide language access in a 2014 settlement agreement with the Justice Department signed in the wake of the slaying of Marcelo Lucero, an Ecuadorean immigrant killed by a group of teenagers in Patchogue in November 2008. A federal investigation found that Suffolk police discouraged Latino residents from filing complaints and failed to investigate crimes and hate incidents involving Latinos.

Cameron said the woman's report about being treated rudely by a desk officer at the Seventh Precinct is being investigated and officers who insult or ignore calls from foreign-language speakers will face disci-

pline. But the vast majority of calls from people not proficient in English are handled appropriately, he said.

"Misconduct or poor service will never be tolerated," he said. "However, it is certainly the exception and not the rule." Internal affairs officers regularly call precinct houses to see if the department's language assistance protocol is being followed, according to Cameron.

The department became a subscriber to Language Line Services in the late 1990s. In March 2010, Cameron said, SCPD began installing dual handset telephones in precinct houses and other police facilities that allow an officer and a foreign-language speaker to use the translation service at the same time. Cellphones linked to the language line were deployed in Suffolk police cars in May 2010.

The vast majority of non-English speakers assisted by police — 92 percent — speak Spanish, Cameron said, but the department has also used the service to assist those who speak Mandarin Chinese, Haitian Creole, Polish, Turkish and Russian. Essential police documents have also been translated into those languages, said Cameron, who only speaks English.

The tablets that will be in-

stalled in 450 patrol cars over the next three years can be removed from the vehicles, giving officers greater mobility when dealing with non-English speakers.

"Once fully deployed, these tablets will place enhanced translation services in the hands of every Suffolk County police officer on patrol," Cameron said.

In 2011, the department created a separate applicant list for Spanish-speaking candidates for the Suffolk police academy. Ten percent of the officers hired since 2013 — 56 cops — speak Spanish. "We are making a tremendous effort to hire more bilingual cops," Cameron said.

Suffolk police now have 75 officers who have been certified as bilingual in Spanish and English and three who have been certified in Polish. Twelve civilian employees have also been certified as bilingual in Spanish and English. Nine officers have completed testing and certification and are now authorized Spanish interpreters, Cameron said.

Cameron said the department will continue to improve how it serves Suffolk County residents who are not proficient in English.

"The diversity of our county is what makes it great," he said, "and our department embraces that in all that we do."