

# **Bilingual Pay Differential**

## ***Introduction***

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 47 million people currently living in the U.S. speak a language other than English. In excess of 11 million people in the U.S. are “linguistically isolated”, meaning that they lack a command of the English language and have no one to help them with language issues on a regular basis. A growing number of federal employees provide services to the linguistically isolated by using their knowledge of foreign languages in their official duties to explain application processes, determine benefit eligibility and provide public safety. Increasingly, the bilingual skills of federal employees are an absolute necessity to serve the public and accomplish the mission of federal agencies. Yet there is no standard across federal agencies to provide compensation for federal workers who make substantial use of their bilingual skills in the workplace.

## ***An Investment in the Current and Future Federal Workforce***

To ensure that all federal workers who use their bilingual skills in the workplace on a regular basis are fairly compensated, AFGE proposes an amendment to 5 U.S.C. § 5545 that adds bilingual skills to the list of factors for which a differential might be paid. Current law provides for a pay differential to federal workers for night, standby, irregular, and hazardous duty work. The AFGE amendment authorizes the head of an agency to pay a 5% differential to any employee who makes substantial use of a foreign language in his or her official duties. The pay differentials would be subject to regulations for proficiency standards and testing, and selection criteria.

The necessity for bilingual pay differential has been recognized by federal law enforcement agencies. Agencies such as Customs and Border Protection and the Border Patrol recognize bilingual skills through either a pay differential or bonuses. Employees who can communicate effectively with the populations federal agencies are mandated to serve greatly assist the agencies in carrying out their respective missions.

In addition to adequately recognizing the skills of current federal workers, a bilingual pay differential would also help to entice young workers with bilingual skills into federal civil service. Although the private sector often pays a hefty dividend for the ability to speak fluently more than one language, many young workers with a commitment to their communities would be more likely to consider federal employment as a career option if they receive adequate compensation for their much sought-after language skills.

A number of federal agency offices are located in areas with a large and growing population of non-English speaking persons, such as California, New Mexico, Texas, New York and Hawaii. Between 1990 and 2000, the non-English speaking population doubled in Nevada, Georgia, North Carolina, Utah, Arkansas and Oregon. Bilingual skills will become increasingly necessary to foster client communication for effective delivery of services and for the successful function of federal agencies. The AFGE amendment to 5 U.S.C. §5545 provides both a mechanism to pay current federal workers using their bilingual skills on the job, and works as an incentive to aid in the future recruitment of bilingual applicants.

### ***Conclusion***

AFGE is actively seeking introduction of a bilingual pay differential amendment as quickly as possible in the 110th Congress. The benefits of a more efficient government and better services to the public will prove far greater than the relatively small investment of the cost of the differential itself.