

Tips for Law Enforcement Encounters with Persons with Autism

Overview. Traditionally, law enforcement officers are trained to follow standard procedures for interactions with suspects. They are typically not often trained to identify the differences between unlawful behavior and someone who has a developmental disability such as autism. This lack of training and knowledge, at times, has led to disastrous consequences in many communities. The Arc of Louisiana, through its Louisiana Disability Legal Resources Project is working to increase law enforcement officer's knowledge of developmental disabilities through training and dissemination of information.

Characteristics of Autism. There are many possible characteristics of someone with autism. It is important to know that a person with autism may have some, all, or varying degrees of each.

- *Self-Stimulatory Behavior (hand flapping finger moving/playing, head or body rocking, spinning self)*
- *Self-injurious Behavior (self-biting, scratching, head banging)*
- *Aggressive Behavior (head butting, biting, punching)*
- *Insensitivity to pain*
- *Aversion to touch*
- *Avoidance of eye contact*
- *In appropriate laughing and crying*
- *Echolalic (repeating exactly what is said)*
- *Oblivious to emotions (may not understand facial expressions)*

Tips During Encounters. In many instances you will respond to a situation, not knowing a person has autism. However, given some of the cues above, if you have evaluated the situation and determined that the individual may have autism, the following tips will help ensure a positive outcome of the encounter.

- *Look for some type of identification. This identification may provide you with a person to contact.*
- *Immediately call the contact person.*
- *If you are unable to find a contact person and the situation is not an emergency Take Your Time.*
- *Remain calm. Use calm body language.*
- *Keep commotion down to a minimum. For example, turn off siren and lights, if people have gathered, if possible take person to a quiet place.*
- *Repeat short direct phrases and repeat them over again. Such as "Come Here", "Sit Down".*
- *Don't interpret non-response as implying guilt.*
- *Don't touch or take by the hand.*

- *Use direct language and avoid idioms like “spread eagle”.*
- *Don’t interpret odd behaviors as belligerent.*
- *Do not try to stop repetitive behaviors.*

RESOURCES.

Louisiana Disability Legal Resources. This project is a joint effort of the Arc of Louisiana and the Independent Living Research Utilization project to connect criminal justice professionals, human service professionals, advocates, Louisianans with disabilities and their families. The project website has numerous resources. A fact sheet on the criminal justice system is available here.

<http://www.thearca.org/programs/louisiana-disability-legal-resources/>

Arc’s National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability. A national clearing house for information and training on the topic of persons with intellectual/developmental disabilities as victims, witnesses, suspects, and offenders of crime. The Arc partners with a broad spectrum of criminal justice professionals at the national, state and local levels to create safer lives for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities who become involved in the criminal justice system. <http://www.thearc.org/NCCJD>

Autism Risk and Safety Management. This company provides resources for law enforcement, emergency first responders, and the autism community. <http://www.autismriskmanagement.com/>

Families Helping Families Resource Centers. Families Helping Families Resource Centers provide information of services, goods, technologies, and activities that improve individuals with disabilities quality of life in the community, help understand their rights and how to advocate for themselves, and lend support from someone “who has been there.” <http://www.laddc.org/Initiatives.cfm?aid=6&id=9>

Louisiana Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities. Contact information for Local Governing Entities (LGEs) can be located here. The LGE’s are responsible for providing services to persons with developmental disabilities in their regions. www.dhh.state.la.us/index.cfm/page/134/n/137

Sources:

Dangerous Encounters: Avoiding Perilous Situations with Autism (2002) Bill Davis & Wendy Goldband Schunick

Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals (2001) Dennis Debbaudt

This publication is funded by the Southwest ADA Center through a grant (H133A110027 and 90DP0022-02-01) from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research. NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this publication do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.