

## **Individuals with Developmental Disabilities and Law Enforcement: Tips for Family Members and Caregivers**

Ethan, a young man with Down syndrome, enjoyed a movie he recently saw so much he wanted to see it again. As his direct support worker left to get the car, Ethan entered the theatre again without purchasing a ticket. Three off-duty police officers responded to the theatre manager's complaint. The response turned physical and ended with Ethan dead due to asphyxiation.

Ethan's story is just one example of how myths and misunderstandings about people with intellectual disabilities, and other disabilities have led to disastrous encounters with law enforcement. Increasingly stories of persons with disabilities receiving inappropriate treatment by law enforcement are making the news across the country. These stories have forced federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to develop policies and protocols for responding to persons with disabilities and provide officers with comprehensive training. While these initiatives are important steps toward addressing this important issue, there are also strategies family members, caregivers, and service providers can implement help ensure the safety of persons with disabilities when encountering law enforcement.

### **WHAT CAN PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND SERVICE PROVIDERS DO?**

***Teach life-skills.*** Most adults with developmental disabilities have not received crime prevention or police awareness education. There are several curricula available (see resources) that are designed to teach the life skills needed to interact appropriately with law enforcement and remain safe in the community.

***Develop a personal handout car or other form of identity for the individual to carry.*** Some type of identification is important, especially if the individual is nonverbal or unable to answer questions about their identity. Make sure the form of identify includes emergency contact information and if appropriate information about the disability.

***Develop a relationship with local law enforcement officials.*** Law enforcement agencies that have implemented initiatives to improve officer interactions with persons with developmental disabilities strongly suggest that parents and caregivers visit their local police station to brief them about the person with a disability. Dennis Debbaudt, a nationally recognized expert in law enforcement and persons with autism, states in his book "Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals" (2002), "Distributing a handout with full information is the best single action that parents and caregivers can take to allow for a better, informed response." The handout should include a picture of the individual, emergency contact information and specific behavioral information if appropriate. You may want to visit your local police station and bring the person with a developmental disability on the visit

***Advocate for training of criminal justice professionals:*** Many of the Disability and Law Enforcement initiatives across the country are a result of grassroots campaigns begun by national, state, or local advocacy organizations. Work with local advocacy organizations to learn more about these initiatives and develop a plan for a campaign in your community. See the resource section below for contact information on advocacy organizations.

***Become familiar with the criminal justice system.*** While there is no research to indicate that persons with intellectual disabilities are more likely to commit criminal offenses than anyone else, persons with intellectual disabilities have committed, been charged with and convicted of crimes. When this occurs the individual's fate will be in the hands of a criminal justice system that is not knowledgeable about persons with disabilities. As a parent or caregiver, you will want to have a basic knowledge about the system, so you can help the criminal justice professionals understand the person with intellectual disabilities and possible mitigating factors.

**Contact your Local Governing Entity, Developmental Support Coordinator and Service Provider Agency if family member is taken into custody.** If an individual is taken into custody by law enforcement it is vital that you contact your regional OCDD entity. These offices have access to resources that can help you navigate the criminal justice system. If the individual receives services and has been assigned a Support Coordinator make sure you contact this individual and a representative from the Service Provider Agency as soon as possible.

## **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/>

**Autism Safety Products.** Provides several useful tools to teach individuals with autism and other special needs to interact safely with police. <https://besafethemovie.com/>

**Louisiana Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities.** Contact information for Local Governing Entities (LGEs) can be located at: [www.dhh.state.la.us/index.cfm/page/134/n/137](http://www.dhh.state.la.us/index.cfm/page/134/n/137)

## **ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS:**

**Advocacy Center.** The Advocacy Center serves persons with disabilities and senior citizens and provides legal assistance, non-legal advocacy assistance, system advocacy, information and referral, and education. <http://www.advocacyla.org/>

**Regional Advisory Committees (RAC).** The Regional Advisory Committees provide information to the State Advisory Committee. The State Advisory Committee uses this information to make recommendations to the State Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities related to the issues and concerns of all Louisiana citizens with developmental disabilities. <http://www.dhh.state.la.us/index.cfm/directory/detail/590>

**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>

Additional Sources:

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

*Intellectual Disability and the Criminal Justice System (2013)* William B. Packard, Ph.D

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