

Considerations for Police and other First Responders

There will be many situations in which a person with autism may encounter police. A survey with individuals with autism and their families indicated that 35% of the individuals with autism had been the victim of a crime and that 23% have had interactions with first responders due to wandering or eloping (Autism Society, 2006).

Due to the nature of autism and the social environments in which individuals with autism may live, the risk for victimization and abuse is heightened.

First responders should also be aware that autism is a spectrum disorder that affects every individual to a differing degree. Individuals may be highly verbal or nonverbal, have above average intelligence or cognitive limitations, and may respond differently to sensory stimuli.

During instances heightened anxiety or when they do not know what is expected of them, individuals with autism may also lose some of their abilities more readily. Providing reassurance will assist in alleviating the individual's anxiety and discomfort.

Appropriate Response/Delivery of Service

A lack of personal familiarity with individuals who have a disability may cause first responders to feel professionally awkward and uncertain when providing emergency care and assistance. Common reactions to individuals with disabilities include fear, embarrassment, or pity and, unfortunately, too often disbelief, disregard, or discounting of information supplied by the individual.

Awareness and education of first responders about disabilities increases their ability to provide appropriate response.

Content material extracted from Safe & Sound, *Autism Society, Serving Victims of Crime Series*



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Autism: INFORMATION FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT AND OTHER FIRST RESPONDERS

Police Officers and other first responders may encounter or be asked to provide services to a person with autism spectrum disorder. Recognizing the signs of autism and knowing effective ways to approach a person on the autism spectrum can minimize situations of risk or victimization of the individual, as well as the risk to those intervening. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have difficulty picking up social cues (social referencing) and understanding other individual's thoughts and intentions, making them vulnerable to a range of crimes, from fraud and theft to more violent crimes. Individuals with ASD are also generally taught compliance from a very young age, making them easy targets for abuse and victimization.

First responders and paramedics Should

- Know when assisting a crime victim who is on the autism spectrum, first responders should take specific actions to communicate with and support the individual.
- Have basic knowledge of how to meet the individual's needs and, if additional assistance is necessary, collaborate with a professional familiar with autism.
- Be aware that individuals with ASD will seek out items and locations that hold fascinations for them. Examples include water sources, trains, and cars.
- Know that Individuals with autism may go to these places without realizing the potential dangers involved.
- Know that during fires, individuals with autism have been known to hide in closets or under beds to escape from the sound of fire alert systems.

Recognizing behaviors associated with autism will allow you to best respond to the situation. A person with autism may:

Not respond to a uniform or badge, or other emergency response symbols—pointing out these items to allow the person to focus is helpful*

Avoid eye contact—do not insist or misinterpret as disrespect or guilt*

Make repetitive motions or soundsMay be a signal of distress but may also be the person's means of securing comfort, unless the person is causing injury or damaging property, do not stop these behaviors*

Become upset when touched—avoid touching if possible, if not, try saying "I want to help you, but I (explain what you intend to do)*

Not provide ID when asked—be patient, and speak slowly and calmly, keep questions simple. Check ID jewelry, card, etc.*

Lack awareness of danger—gently persuade or remove the person from the dangerous situation. Offer an alternative to the dangerous action. Be aware that if the person is anxious there is a risk they could bolt without warning.*

Continue to do something after being told to stop—demonstrative non-threatening gestures may communicate more effectively than a verbal command. Demonstrate what you want the person to do. Repeat the behaviors and instructions. Use a communication board if possible and allow time for processing of information before responses are given.*

Appear to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs—the actions of people with autism can appear to be odd or inappropriate. When asked about drug use, the person may admit to having taken drugs if they take prescribed medications. Avoid making assumptions about alcohol or drug use.*

Become self-injurious—under stress an individual may become self-injurious. Use the least invasive technique possible to ensure the individual's safety*

Become aggressive—restraint's should only be used if the individual's or other's safety is at risk. Individuals with autism may have a poorly developed upper trunk area. Positional asphyxia could occur so it is critical to ensure that a prone position is not used and the person is move to a secure and quiet place away from distractions. De-escalation techniques to calm or distract the individual are safer and more effective*

