

EMERGENCY RESPONSE: LAW ENFORCEMENT AND AUTISM



In the midst of headlines involving confrontations between police and individuals with ASD, appropriate response and preparedness are critical in establishing community collaboration...|

BY ANDREW AND
CAROLYN GAMMICCHIA

Law enforcement and autism. What is it about the concept that may cause an unconscious sigh to escape our lips or make our shoulders tense up a bit? For a lot of us, it brings to mind the many incidents that we hear about or may have personally experienced while images pass through our heads of both positive and negative outcomes. We may envision flashing lights and can almost hear the shrill sound of sirens that take us back to events which vividly portray frightened children in the arms of officers returning them to their parents after having wandered. We might recall expressions of anguish and grief of family members after their loved one has had an encounter with the police where they



◀ UNIQUE PERSPECTIVES—

The Gammicchias approach the topic of autism and law enforcement as first responders, parents, siblings, and advocates. They feel collaboration and looking at areas of present concern from both sides is essential.

investigations, narcotics enforcement, and serving as a school liaison officer. Carolyn, as former police officer with 21 years experience, supports individuals with disabilities as a non-attorney advocate.

We are parents of a son with autism, as well as community activists who have been working to educate and collaborate with first responders now for over two decades. Our hope is to provide information that will assist in positively framing thoughts about those within law enforcement while also sharing ways to work collaboratively to ensure the safety of individuals living with autism in their communities. Our primary goal is to have each side of this discussion realize what



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BEYOND THE HEADLINES

Unfortunately, we often focus on situations that may have caused harm to individuals as the brain often remembers traumatic occurrences first. The events that cause more emotion, stir our souls, and grasp at our heartstrings will be what we automatically recall and may cause us to worry almost daily. We must also consider that we usually only call the police when something bad transpires and we need assistance, but we also have to consider they are responding to incidents 24/7. The dilemma we face is being able to defer these thoughts, work toward creating a better understanding of the expectations we and our law enforcement community may have, while also being able to come together to achieve what is our combined ultimate goal: the safety of individuals with autism.

In the last few months, we've heard some terrible stories of police encounters that have ended in injury and even death. Typically, our knee-jerk reaction is to place blame, while at the same time we want to prevent these situations in any way possible. That is why we are bringing you our personal story from a very unique perspective.

Andrew is a police officer who has been in the field for 28 years in a variety of capacities which included

aware that an individual present has autism, it may affect how they perceive what is taking place.

Analyze: Officers analyze what is perceived, drawing from their training and personal experience in the field. Those with training on autism will use that knowledge in making an analysis.

Formulate: To formulate a plan of action, the officer has many considerations and often has to do this within a very short period of time depending on the situation. As in those first steps, information obtained from those initiating the call and formal training on autism will assist the officer in generating an appropriate plan.

Initiate: This final step in the initial response phase is where the officer initiates action on the plan developed. As with any situation, the better the plan is—and the more specific to meeting the needs of the individual—the better the outcome.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Even with proper preparation and training, officers can't

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different than the citizens they serve.

On any given day, police officers answer numerous radio runs, each with an unpredictable outcome. One domestic disturbance could start as a small disagreement and escalate into an assault complaint. Because officers receive limited information from dispatchers relayed from the caller, each possible scenario has to be imagined in order for the officer to be prepared. To do so, officers are often trained to respond by using the PAFI Protocol which was developed to assist officers in their responses.

To better understand how this may apply in a situation involving an individual with autism, here is a PAFI breakdown:

Perceive: Upon arrival at the scene, officers perceive what is occurring by using their senses—they see what is taking place and hear what is transpiring. If they aren't

will also ask questions at the scene to obtain necessary information about what is occurring. All of these are considerations that an officer formulates to respond to the situation to the best of his ability.

SAFETY FIRST

I have been a police officer for 28 years and have been dispatched to more types of runs than can be imagined. The desired outcome is always the same: keep people safe, use the least amount of force possible, and find a favorable solution to the situation for all. Not every incident has gone as planned, but I've been able to gather information and work through each incident.

There are not many jobs where the responsibility is to preserve life—and even fewer where *preserving* life may involve *taking* a life. That's the reason that a police officer has to be as prepared as possible for any situation and has to work collaboratively to ensure appropriate responses take place.

BEHIND-THE-SCENES TRAINING

the other's expectations are, and if those are not possible to attain, then to understand why and to work toward creating new ones.

POINT: AN OFFICER'S PERSPECTIVE

It's essential to know the perspective of a police officer and how law enforcement officials perform their duties to understand how they may respond to various situations. That way we can also gauge if our expectations are realistic, especially since officers are really no

predict what will happen; the time between the point of perception and taking action may be only seconds. The caller should be ready to give as many details to the dispatcher as possible. Something that may not seem important to the caller may make a big difference to the responding officer.

The dispatcher, or in some cases the 911 operator, also will have to do a good job of getting information from the caller. For those calling in for assistance for an individual with autism, it is essential that information be disclosed that will be vital to assist the officer(s) responding.

Every call is taken seriously and each question that is asked is important and for a specific reason, so it is important that we try to provide the information that will assist. Someone calling the police should not be afraid to ask questions of the dispatcher either. This may help them prepare for a police officer's arrival. An officer

Police officers go through training on an annual basis, and some train quarterly as does the department I'm with. These trainings are in areas including use of firearms, first aid, defensive tactics and legal updates. They are mandatory and exist because of the extensive responsibilities involved daily and also because of liability.

Additional trainings in which officers participate are usually one-time sessions and/or are voluntary trainings, which would include most training on responding to individuals with autism. Many departments usually don't have their officers participate in training that is not mandated or they may send one or two officers. Overall, the one thing these trainings have in common is that they help the officers perform their duties better and more safely.

As an officer responding to such runs, I've utilized the tools I've developed both as a parent and a trainer within this


area. However, I also know that each situation is as varied as each individual with autism I may be responding to. That is why I feel it is imperative for officers to have baseline knowledge of disabilities in general as well as the different response techniques that may be required to meet specific needs. As someone who feels that more is better, these types of trainings also should provide a cross reference and resources for officers to use while also offering referrals to individuals and their families.

COUNTERPOINT: A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

For years, many parents have been searching for answers when it comes to autism and dealing with law enforcement. National organizations have long said—especially when an unfortunate incident occurs—that we need a national autism training initiative for our first responder community. I agree 100% and am happy to report that the development of a national center for just

THE GAMMICCHIA FAMILY

The Gammicchia family has been active in this area for almost two decades as law enforcement officers, advocates, and community collaborators. In many of their trainings, which also involve their son with autism, what is first addressed is appropriate identification and response as well as appropriate preparedness by community members. They often utilize this photo, which was featured in a 2002 edition of the ASA Advocate magazine, to show that autism is often a "hidden disability". When asked which child in the photo has autism, many participants often do not accurately choose their son Nicholas who is on the right, based on physical appearance alone. This is a very important consideration too for all of us because having an expectation that can be done, within a limited time frame, may be unrealistic. Education and collaboration are key to ensuring responses within the community are appropriate. The articles from this issue can be accessed here: http://www.leanonus.org/images/Protecting_Loved_Ones_with_Autism.pdf



such a program is scheduled to be launched within the next year.

However, even with such promising plans underway, I believe that a better understanding

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of the parent perspective—as well as the perspective of the individual with autism—is greatly needed. As someone who has served on many national level committees alongside self-advocates, parents, and other professionals advocating for change in this area, I feel that we can all agree on one thing: we want safe outcomes for all involved. As the spouse of a police officer, I can tell you I want my husband to be safe and be able to come home at the end of his shift.

PRIORITIZING SAFETY CONCERNS

As parents, my husband and I realized early on that safety issues were very important for our son for a variety of reasons. Like many others with ASD, he has difficulty communicating, and when anxiety is heightened, his ability to communicate is inhibited further. Many parents tend to believe their loved ones won't be left without adult supervision. However, this is usually when these incidents arise and there is no one on hand to “interpret” what is needed.

For individuals with autism who are leading more independent lives,

this area of preparation isn't typically a priority. So how do we meet these needs? Individuals should be identified per their specific need set in this area and supported via

educational programming and services to meet those needs. We also have to work toward coordinating efforts with national organizations that can assist such as the National

Autism Association and their AWAARE initiative, as well as The Arc's recently launched National Criminal Justice Center on Disability. These types of programs need to be supported and accessed to demonstrate the needs of individuals with autism while also providing resources to those attempting to meet these vast needs.

THE LOCAL FRONT

Another priority for those advocating for systems change in this area occurs at the local level in our own communities. Meet with your local law enforcement officials, offer them resources, and show them how becoming more knowledgeable about autism and all that goes with it will be of benefit to them. After all, if they don't know what your expectations are, they won't be able to meet them.

HOPE ON THE HORIZON

The Arc's National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability is Launched

For many of us working toward educating those within the Criminal Justice community on disabilities, the journey has been rather long and frustrating. Even though good programs may exist across the country, there has been no national agency that one can be referred to for information and resources including those for individuals with autism. That changed in 2013 when The Arc received funding from the U.S. Department of Justice to work collaboratively to create The Arc's National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability.

This is the first national effort of its kind to bring together both victim and suspect/offender issues involving people with disabilities, with a focus on intellectual and developmental disabilities (or I/DD), under one roof. NCCJD's mission is to become the national focal point for the collection and dissemination of resources and serve as a bridge between justice and disability professionals. NCCJD will pursue and promote safety, fairness and justice for all people with disabilities as suspects, offenders, victims or witnesses.

NCCJD will serve as a national clearinghouse for information and training on the topic of people with I/DD as victims, witnesses and suspects or offenders of

crime. NCCJD is working with over 20 agency partners and advisors that include a broad spectrum of professionals, including law enforcement, legal and disability fields at the national, state and local levels to create safer lives for people with I/DD who become involved in the criminal justice system. With support from our partners and advisors, over the next two years NCCJD is excited to provide:

- ▶ Information & referral and technical assistance
- ▶ Training for those in the law enforcement, legal, victim advocacy and disability advocacy fields (including web-based and on-site training)
- ▶ A robust on-line resource library (including fact sheets, state-by-state database of relevant laws/legislation and directory of expert attorneys, witnesses, forensic interviewers and victim advocates)
- ▶ Three white papers to promote identification of promising practices and also highlight critical topical issues in the field
- ▶ Greater public awareness via an issue-specific marketing/communication strategy

NCCJD's goal is to build the capacity of the criminal justice system through our 700 plus chapter network to respond to gaps in existing services for people with disabilities, focusing on people with I/DD who remain a hidden population within the criminal justice system and who have little or no access to advocacy supports or services.*

The NCCJD is also currently hosting monthly webinars that are free to access. To view a past webinar, register for an upcoming webinar, or find out more about training and other resources, visit NCCJD's web site at <http://www.thearc.org/NCCJD>. For more information on the NCCJD contact The Arc at NCCJDinfo@thearc.org or visit their website <http://www.thearc.org>.

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As someone who started writing on this subject twelve years ago, I've seen less activity on the local front in the last two years mainly due to the budget constraints many departments face. However, this investment will pay off in the end for collaborators—and it doesn't take much in the way of time commitment or funding. There are now many options for training professionals on autism and many parents are doing the trainings themselves or collaborating with local disability organizations to do so. The bottom line is that we cannot wait to get this done—and we are the ones who have to do it.

Despite the regrettable outcomes we've all read about, we ask that each of you look at this as a clean slate that we as a community can build upon. Rather than waiting for that next shoe to drop, let's be empowered and proactive, moving forward to ensure that these interactions are positive. The collaborations created will provide not only safer communities for individuals with autism—but for all of our community members, including the police officers who serve and protect us daily. ◀

ASSISTANCE TO COUNTER WANDERING

New Funding will Provide Locating Devices for Individuals with Disabilities...

By Carolyn Gammicchia

As a parent of a son with autism who had wandering tendencies as a young child, I was elated to learn that funding is being provided through the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program to assist families in obtaining locating devices for their children. Though there is funding available via Medicaid for individuals to obtain a Personal Emergency Response Safety device (PERS), this will be an option for many more individuals.

This effort came about following the tragedy after Avonte Oquendo went missing when he wandered from his school in Queens, New York in November of 2013. As many of us know, his remains were located nine miles from the site of his disappearance. Soon afterwards, New York Senator Charles Schumer promoted the passage of "Avonte's Law" to secure funds for a national program to address wandering. Within days, the Department of Justice announced that a block of funds would be allocated for this project via the dissemination of Byrne Grants to provide locating devices for individuals with developmental disabilities.

This grant funding, approximately fifteen million dollars initially, is made available via the national funding program to local law enforcement agencies through an application process. The grant

individuals within the jurisdiction will have access to this equipment once it's available.

- 3 REACH OUT TO LOCAL CIVIC AND SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS** such as Kiwanis and Lions Clubs to assist with matching funds to show support of the program.
- 4 RESEARCH** the types of devices that are able to be utilized in your area. Not all devices work in all locations.
- 5 CREATE A PROPOSAL** for your local jurisdiction to show how the program benefits them. Most importantly, tell your personal story and the stories of others to show the need for such a program. Access these resources for further support materials:
 - ▶ Autism fact sheet for Law Enforcement: http://www.leanonus.org/images/LAW_ENFORCEMENT.pdf
 - ▶ Fact Sheet on Autism and Wandering: <http://nationalautismassociation.org/docs/WanderingFactSheet.pdf>
 - ▶ People with Intellectual Disabilities within the Criminal Justice System: <http://www.thearc.org/document.doc?id=3664>

proposals put forth by the local agencies are then reviewed and funds allocated via state initiatives.

The proposals must identify the needs of the community, specify how funds will be used, and adhere to Byrne Grant specifications. This will take time and the majority of agencies will not apply for these funds automatically. It's important to note that only 1,100 agencies currently receive these funds; some states contain that many police departments.

To obtain needed equipment, here are some suggested steps:

1 CHECK THESE LISTS OF AGENCIES currently eligible for Byrne Grant funds:

► State Administering Agencies:
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/saa/index.htm

► FY 2013 list of eligible JAG jurisdictions:
www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program_ID=59

If your local agency isn't listed, contact them and ask to arrange for an appointment with their Police Chief or Sheriff to discuss what it will take for them to be included. The Bureau of Justice Assistance press release is here:

<https://www.bja.gov/Funding/TrackingDeviceFunding.pdf>

2 CONTACT LOCAL SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS once you have an appointment time, and ask for data on wandering in your area. The agency will want to know how many

6 MAKE YOUR CASE. Go to the meeting and bring along as many families and individuals who support such a program as possible. Be confident in telling your family's own story. If your loved one can't attend, bring a photo of him you can place on the table while discussing your proposal.

7 OFFER YOURSELF AS A RESOURCE to your local police department/first responder agency. At the same time, suggest additional steps such as adding a 911 volunteer data base registry to allow residences to be flagged with information provided about an individual with a disability.

8 DEBRIEF with those who attended the meeting to discuss next steps.

9 FOLLOW-UP with a thank you letter that expresses your appreciation for the time provided and reiterate any agreed upon terms of the conversation or time line for an answer.

10 CONGRATULATE YOURSELF AND THE OTHERS WHO PARTICIPATED. You'll be doing a great public service for your community and not only meeting the needs of your child, but you may save the life of someone else's as well.

Sources: The Bureau of Justice Assistance, The National Autism Association, L.E.A.N. On Us, The Arc.

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