


SAFETY KEEPING

Five years ago, Scott Bailey, a police officer in the Pittsburgh suburb of Aspinwall, noticed a pair of worrying trends: As more and more individuals nationwide were diagnosed with autism, the amount of formal training about autism for police officers stayed stagnant.

The father of two sons on the autism spectrum, Mr. Bailey recognized the need for this to be addressed. “I wanted to create a safeguard—not just for my family, but for other families as well.”

That safeguard was a police training video, “Encountering People with Autism: A First Responders’ Training,” which was commissioned by Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen Zappala Jr. and inspired by the experiences of Mr. Bailey and others who had children with autism. Distributed by the district attorney’s office, the video is one of several steps taken by local law enforcement to ensure that first responders are equipped to respond properly to individuals with autism.



Police encounters with people who have mental health issues can be fraught with safety challenges. An Allegheny County law enforcement video on autism is one effort to prevent the worst from happening.
By Jacob Winningham



Officer Scott Bailey
ASPINWALL POLICE DEPT.

Aspinwall police Officer Scott Bailey's experiences with two sons on the autism spectrum helped to inspire the creation of an instructional video for first responders about what to do when encountering individuals who have autism.

Since “Encountering People with Autism” was produced in 2014, the conversation around how to properly police individuals with cognitive disabilities and mental health challenges has grown on a national and local scale. Tragic stories of individuals experiencing mental health crises and being killed by police also have been reported across the country. Little data is collected nationally on use of force by police, including the degree and recipients of such police action. What has been compiled usually does not differentiate between the types of mental health conditions.

But according to a Washington Post police shootings database begun in 2015 because of the lack of government agency statistics, in 2018 alone, 213 people with confirmed mental health issues were shot and killed by police in the United States. Of that number, two were fatally shot by police in Pennsylvania.

In the specific case of autism, Pennsylvania is one of only a few states nationwide—others include Florida and New Jersey—that mandate autism training for first responders. Yet, even for states that require police officers to go through training, the reality is sometimes disappointing: Many law enforcement agencies in these states report participating in only a portion of the programs or not at all.

Efforts such as the “Encountering People with Autism” video are meant to encourage thorough and dedicated training and participation.

“The important thing to remember is that we are training these officers to deal with people, not scenarios,” Mr. Bailey said. “Plenty of training resources forget to make that distinction.”

But while some law enforcement officials make efforts to improve their interactions with individuals with disabilities, advocacy groups and civil rights organizations see the progress left to be made. Susan Mizner, disability counsel for the national American Civil Liberties Union, contends that “different training, not additional training” is needed.

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Susan Mizner, disability counsel, American Civil Liberties Union

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Among the communities that have established alternatives to police officers responding to mental health emergencies is Eugene, Oregon, Ms. Mizner said. In that city, trained mental health professionals and non-police first responders such as paramedics and EMTs are hooked into the same call center as the 911 dispatchers. Then the dispatchers can decide whether a situation requires involvement from officers, mental health professionals or both.

In Allegheny County, besides the “Encountering People with Autism” video, all 120 police departments in Allegheny County have been provided with information packets for officers that contain instructions on how to approach individuals on the autism spectrum. Guidance includes how officers should identify themselves, how they could assist and not antagonize individuals with autism, and how to recognize and respond to various sudden, rapid movements the individuals might make.

Grants to cover the cost of various supports for individuals with autism, including dogs and GPS devices for children with autism, who have a tendency to roam, also have been given to local families.

“Unfortunately, many of the people who come into contact with the criminal justice system have little or no access to treatment and medication [for these issues],” Mr. Zappala noted.

With the help of state Sen. Lindsey Williams, Mr. Bailey is currently pushing for the inclusion of autism and similar disabilities on driver’s licenses and identification cards.

Changes are also happening on a statewide level. In 2015, Gov. Tom Wolf signed a bill requiring district judges and police officers to undergo training on autism, intellectual disabilities and mental health.

Scenes from the video "Encountering People with Autism: A First Responders' Training" illustrate appropriate methods for interacting with people on the autism spectrum.



Mr. Zappala believes "housing is the ultimate goal" for individuals with mental health challenges who are arrested by police officers, though he concedes that it is often difficult to properly place people who have been arrested or incarcerated and who need attention for mental health issues.

Diversions court for repeat offenders has been effective in recent years. These special courts redirect defendants from jail to programs that provide both formal supervision and treatment of the underlying factors contributing to the actions that led to their arrest.

In addition, Mr. Zappala petitioned to have misdemeanor-level cases involving people with mental health challenges proceed via summons rather than by warrant. Unlike a warrant, a summons allows for the accused individual or their legal defense to inform the district attorney's office, law enforcement or any other appropriate parties of the accused's

mental health history. Provisions such as these are incremental but important steps in the process of improving interactions between individuals with mental health conditions and law enforcement.

To further improve relationships between law enforcement and those with mental health issues, Mr. Zappala acknowledged that it was important for law enforcement to listen to these individuals.

"We understand the problems, and we talk about how we can assist [people with mental health issues]," he said. "But ultimately we need to talk to them and work in their best interests."

Mr. Bailey added that anyone interested in helping those with autism in any way should "simply get started."

"It does not take much to get involved with and become informed about the autism community," he said. "Once you're involved and informed, helping becomes much easier."

In addressing concerns about interactions between people with mental health conditions and law enforcement, Ms. Mizner recommends working on increasing the number of mental health support systems in local communities, in addition to pushing for alternatives to police involvement. Cities and towns looking to establish different options to calling police, she noted, must be ready to invest plenty of time and money in the effort.

"The most important thing to achieve with alternatives to police is making sure that [these options] are well staffed and appropriately funded," she said. "Communities have to do this work thoroughly. It involves training lots of different people, but it will end up saving money, not to mention lives." **h**