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Subject: Hope for Autism team Autism and Police Encounters. Share to promote awareness. Marianela Alvarez

Dear parents of children with special needs, I would like to share with you all a document that I have put together with good information for police officers. April is the autism awareness month, which is a great time to share awareness and educate those who can help our children. Feel free to copy and share with the police officers in your neighborhood. Doing so, you could be helping your own child in a near future. Love, Marianela

What is autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors.

ASD can be (but is not always) associated with intellectual disability, difficulties in motor coordination and attention and physical health issues such as sleep and gastrointestinal disturbances. Some persons with ASD may excel in visual skills, music, math and art.

Autism statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identify around 1 in 68 American children as on the autism spectrum—a ten-fold increase in prevalence in 40 years. Careful research shows that this increase is only partly explained by improved diagnosis and awareness. Studies also show that autism is four to five times more common among boys than girls. An estimated 1 out of 42 boys and 1 in 189 girls are diagnosed with autism in the United States.

ASD affects over 2 million individuals in the U.S. and tens of millions worldwide.

Autism Behavior and Police Encounters:

Many kinds of autism behavior can lead to many different outcomes. One of the worst nightmares a parent can have about their child with autism is that they get into an encounter with the police, and get into trouble because the police officer isn't trained in how to work with a person with autism.

What Could go Wrong?

Unfortunately, many things. A person with autism may be overwhelmed very quickly by the flashing lights of a police car, by dealing with a stranger they don't know, by being asked questions too quickly – among other things. They may not be able to respond when the police officer asks them questions. This may be interpreted as a defiance or failure to cooperate.

They may lunge at a police officer's badge because it is shiny, or run away because they are scared. They may unwittingly engage in autism behavior that is threatening to the officer.

Tips to Help Police Recognize Autism Behavior:

- Have your child or young adult with autism wear a MedicAlert or other ID bracelet identifying that they have autism.
- Alert your local police department that your child has autism so that they will be familiar with them in a law enforcement situation.
- Try to teach your loved one with autism what to do if they encounter law enforcement. Give them a card that they could hand out identifying that they have autism. The card would briefly explain what that means for their communication differences. If possible teach your loved one to verbally explain that they have autism. Tell them to try to look at the officer and remain as calm as possible, etc.

What Should Police Officers Know About Those with Autism?

There are many sorts of autism behavior that police should be trained to look for. This will help them understand how to treat the person in an appropriate way. You can share this information with your local police department as a starting point for educating them about autism.

Police Should Know That:

- Sometimes a lack of eye contact is not an indicator of guilt, but of an autism spectrum condition.
- People with autism may lack any fear of real dangers and do things that seem very bizarre to them.
- Behaviors that might otherwise seem indicative of drug use, criminal behavior or defiance can, again, just be symptoms of autism behavior.
- A person with autism may not recognize the significance of a police uniform or badge, or understand what they are supposed to do in such a situation.
- There may be a fight or flight reaction associated with sensory issues or panic at being in an unfamiliar situation.
- There will be communication issues, and many individuals with autism will not be able to speak at all.
- People with autism can be very literal and may not understand what you are saying in the intent you meant it in.

What Should Police Look For?

Police officers are not expected to make a diagnosis in the field, but in general if the person seems agitated, talking to themselves, rocking back and forth, resisting eye contact, is frightened and not speaking, and doesn't seem to understand traditional social conventions, autism could definitely be a possibility.

If they have heightened reactions to sensory stimuli like police car lights, police dogs, people talking too loudly or too quickly, then it could definitely be autism behavior. Treat the person as if they have autism until you can have a law enforcement officer who is trained in autism or a friend or relative tell you otherwise.

What Police Officers Should Know About Working with a Person with Autism:

- Turn off the flashing lights of the police car. This can aggravate the sensory issues of a person with autism, and cause unwanted autism behavior. Anything increasing sensory distress can cause the situation to escalate.
- Approach calmly. Talk softly and gently. Remember to allow for delayed responses of 10-15 seconds due to information processing issues.
- Use short and direct phrases like "Stand up now" or "Get in the car." This will be easier to process.
- Don't use slang expressions. People with autism are very literal minded.
- Use written phrases or pictures if the person still doesn't seem to understand.
- Be ready to hear; "I didn't do anything illegal or nothing wrong".
- Model how you want the person to act. Use calming body language.
- Don't try to stop repetitive autism behavior unless they are a danger in some way. The same goes for if the person is holding onto an object that seems to be giving them comfort. It is their way of dealing with stress.
- Don't use force if the person does not seem to respond to orders.
- Try to contact someone who knows the person to find out how to best proceed in handling with the person with autism behavior.
- In a jail population, put the person in isolation initially, as they may be in danger in a general jail population.

A safe and open communication between the autism community and the law enforcers will make the community safer for everyone involved, especially those with autism behavior.