

[forum]

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When an Autistic Child Flees New Autism Bill Should Help

we had been searching for Billy for 20 minutes and couldn't find him anywhere. This was long before coronavirus disease caused us all to stay home; we just needed to keep track of him because he was a child and vulnerable. We looked through the house, then the yard, then the neighborhood, with his brothers setting off on foot in different directions. My husband and I got in separate cars to try to cover more ground.

Nothing. Billy, then age 11, was gone.

I was terrified that I had waited too long to call the police. I thought we would find him, like we always did... but not this time.

I finally called 911.

The police officer who answered said, "Is his name Benny?" (Ha! Billy doesn't speak clearly, and when he says his name, it sounds like Benny.) They had already found him! He was at the gas station at the intersection of Route 16 and the westbound side of Route 9, where they were talking to him calmly, and keeping him safe until we got there.

It turns out Billy had run down Cliff Road to the gas station to buy potato chips, after first stopping at Brigham's (the ice cream store that used to be on Washington Street) for a mint chocolate chip cone. This little adventure involved crossing two very busy roads, which he was not able to do safely. A Wellesley police officer happened to see him cross all four lanes of traffic on Route 9 with a slinky in his hands and no coat on, so went to the gas station to investigate. I can only imagine how parents of a missing child might feel during the times of COVID-19. We are forever grateful.

Billy wasn't upset when we found him—in fact he was quite pleased with himself. In Wellesley

and Weston, we are fortunate that every officer has been trained in how to respond with people who are on the autism spectrum. But not all police departments in our state do this, which is why The Arc of Massachusetts, a Waltham-based organization that works to enhance the lives of people with disabilities, currently has a police training bill as one of its top legislative priorities.

The new bill, S 1443, will require the training of all Massachusetts law enforcement and corrections officers in how to interact with persons on the autism spectrum. According to The Arc, every year, numerous people with autism spectrum disorder suffer psychological trauma and physical injury as a result of misunderstanding. With this act, law enforcement and corrections officers will be trained to notice the signs of autism spectrum disorder and how to appropriately interact with these individuals.

Although fleeing isn't the only reason why police are called to interact with a child on the autism spectrum, it is a big one. An Autism Speaks study confirmed what we autism parents already know: wandering (or bolting) by

children with autism is common and dangerous—and puts tremendous stress on families. Nearly half of children with autism spectrum disorder wander or bolt from a safe, supervised place. And, in my experience, they take off like lightning.

For parents who are currently raising a child who flees, both the Wellesley and Weston Police Departments encourage parents to provide them with information about the child, including a recent photo, and other relevant information. As Wellesley Sergeant Brian Spencer said, “We would like to know where they might try to go, if there is something we can do to make the child feel more comfortable, and if there is anything that would upset the child when we interact with them.”

Weston Police Chief Michael Goulding said that Weston does that too, plus they now initiate follow-up meetings with parents after they are called in, so that they can assess and tailor their police response to the individual family. Weston partnered with the Doug Flutie Foundation for Autism Awareness month in April, and wore a special patch that month, promoting autism awareness.

Police encounter people on the autism spectrum for reasons other than fleeing, and standard police training often does not work. Many people with autism display no physical markers to alert them to their disability, but may be prone to communication challenges and sensory issues. As Lieutenant Martin Baker of the Norwood Police

Department noted, “Just a light touch on the shoulder can trigger a violent response.”

According to Carrie Noseworthy, founder of the local safety training group called ASaferMe, the autism police training should serve to decrease unnecessary arrests, trauma, and injury to the individual, while increasing safety for the officer. “If the individual is having a crisis, they need to access the organization that is going to help (a hospital, provider, etc.) rather than the justice system, where trauma and issues are typically exacerbated—and they are in a system that is not trained to help them,” she said.

With the training, situations like what happened in the Framingham Target store recently, where an autistic child was handcuffed and a caregiver charged with assault, may be avoided. Emotions clearly run very high all around when the police interact with people on the spectrum, and training can only help.

We are thankful to the police for all they do, even with the silent threat of COVID-19 all around them. Billy’s outing could have turned out much differently. How he managed to avoid getting hit by a car we will never know. Not all parents are so lucky, and not all towns have such perceptive police officers, which is why we should urge our legislators to pass this bill. [WW](#)

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