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EDITOR'S PICK

Responders receive special training for autism encounters

Rebecca Croomes Jul 15, 2016



Courtesy photo/Todd Tomerlin

Firefighters, dispatchers, law enforcement and other emergency personnel participated in special training Thursday to be better prepared for encounters with persons on the autism spectrum.

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With the number of autism diagnoses on the rise, it's not uncommon for everyday folks on the street to come across an autistic person. There's ways for the average person to learn to interact with autistic persons to make them feel more comfortable, but what are first responders supposed to do in an emergency?

The Autism Society of Alabama and the Alabama Council of Developmental Disabilities sponsored a workshop Thursday for emergency and law enforcement personnel to learn how to better interact with those on the autism spectrum.

Dustin Chandler of the Interaction Advisory Group led the workshops, exploring the complexities and challenges of assisting the autistic in emergencies and stressful situations. Chandler, a former law enforcement officer and father of a child with special needs, has made a career in helping the first response community help those with special needs.

"It's very important for them," Chandler said. "We just want our guys to be prepared on the street. Obviously we're trying to fill that training gap."

Todd Tomerlin of the local chapter of the Autism Society of Alabama and father to an autistic son said he felt blessed by the support the event received from the Limestone County Sheriff's Office, Athens Police Department, Athens Fire&Rescue and emergency dispatch personnel. He said making this kind of training available to professionals helps put his and his wife's mind at ease when thinking about how their son might need to interact with police or firefighters one day.

"I teach Gage how to interact, but until you get in those situations, you never know," he said, adding the stress of an emergency could cause his son to revert to some behaviors that aren't helpful in a situation, but a trained officer might know how to respond to. "Dustin's doing a great job teaching them all that."

Tomerlin is working to make the training available annually to any emergency and law enforcement agency in North Alabama.

"It's great training," he said. "Even as a parent, I learn and am able to take that to other parents."

One of those lessons is parents and guardians can assist first responders by having a physical item, such as a sticker, placed on their front door or on a car window to let emergency personnel know right off the bat they're working with an autistic individual. Taking advantage of Smart911 is also a major benefit to special needs families, Tomerlin said, because once a call is made, the family's profile appears instantly to dispatchers, allowing them to communicate with fire, medical and law enforcement agents they are assisting someone with autism.

Another valuable tool is an identification card a person can carry with them to show they are autistic. These types of cards are useful since five out of every 10 autistic persons are non-verbal, Chandler said. Tomerlin explained that for \$10, a family can get a form from the state mental health office, have it verified by a doctor and sent off to the state to have the card printed up.

As the county continues to grow, more residents with autism disorders moving in is a certain possibility. But already, North Alabama has the highest concentration of residents with autism disorders in the state, Tomerlin said.

"This training is much needed for that reason alone."

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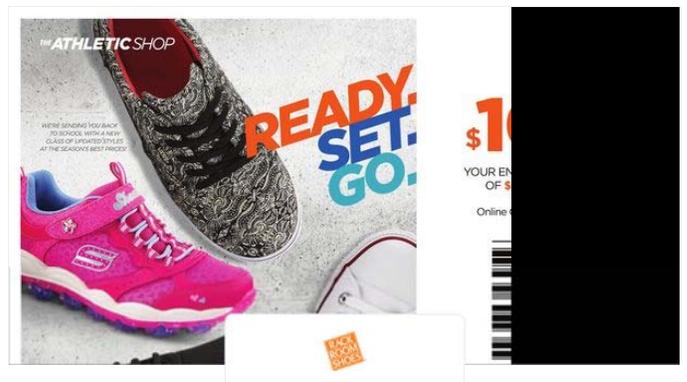
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