Autism and Law Enforcement

CERTIFICATION I

POST AUTISM COMMUNICATION AND DE-ESCALATION TACTICS – 2 HOURS

Course Purpose: "Autism Communication and De-escalation Tactics" gives officers a wide range of strategies to effectively identify, respond to and de-escalate individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities.

Learning Outcomes: Upon completion of the course, officers will be equipped to engage with persons with autism and/or other developmental disabilities by utilizing adapted communication tactics, behavioral techniques and other proven methods of safely securing the scene.

Course Overview

Autism Interaction Solutions provides a 2-hour training module, which addresses autism interactions with police officers.

The first hour of the program integrates lectures, multiple hands-on exercises and a break-out session, which cover how to recognize autism and how best to communicate with and de-escalate an autistic or developmentally disabled individual.

In the second hour, autistic teenagers and young adults – who range in severity from completely non-verbal to highly verbal – arrive with their caregivers to present to and interact with the trainees.

The program has been developed in consultation with the LASD MET team and is integrated into current RCPI MET training schedule.

This training is designed to give officers a variety of techniques designed to minimize risk during encounters with this population, whose numbers are increasing every year. Officers will gain both a better understanding of the unique challenges facing autistic people, as well as ways in which to identify, communicate with and de-escalate these individuals. The course includes the following:

- Trainees undergo hands-on exercises to better understand the unique challenges faced by those with autism and why following orders, answering questions and achieving compliance might be compromised for these individuals.
- Facilitated interaction between first responders and a wide range of autistic individuals – from severe to high-functioning.
- Autistic participants involved have been presenting with Autism Interaction Solutions for two years, thus enabling them to remain calm within a training setting. These individuals – even the most severe - provide invaluable insight into non-verbal communication and autistic behavior which might otherwise be interpreted as non-compliance, mental illness, drug use , aggression, or all of the above.

- Caregiver input, which contributes “real-life” stories of police and first responder interactions.

Course Content
(all materials, including handouts, wallet-sized summary cards provided by instructor):

I. **Introduction:**

Learning objective: *Asked to define autism, students will be able to provide definitions, understand its prevalence, features and the likelihood that they will have contact with this commun*

a.) Instructor: experience with autism

b.) Who in the room has had personal or professional experience with persons with autism? Officers are asked to describe any experience they may have had with an autistic person. What was the outcome?

c.) What is Autism?

i. A complex brain disorder affecting 1 in 45 individuals in the U.S.

ii. Causes are unknown

iii. Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the nation

iv. Numbers are increasing by 10 - 17 % annually. The prevalence of autism in U.S. children increased by 119.4 percent from 2000 to 2010

v. Autism is more prevalent in boys than in girls: 75 to 25

vi. Autism is diagnosed through behavioral assessments, looking at deficits in three domains:

1. Social Interaction
2. Communication
3. Repetitive Thoughts and Behaviors

II. Reasons Law Enforcement Might Be Called:
Learning objective: *Given a description of behavior during a call for service, students will be able to include autism as a possible factor in this behavior.*

a.) Wandering/elopement
b.) Self-injurious or repetitive behavior
c.) Peering into windows
d.) Moving merchandise around stores

e.) Turning faucets or lights on and off
f.) Erroneous reports of child abuse or assault against adult caregiver, who is actually trying to calm autistic person
g.) Hitting or biting others (including children)
h.) Domestic disturbance, possible 5150

III. Why Do Autistic People Behave They Way They Do and Why Can't They Just Comply?

Learning objective: *while interacting with persons with autism, students will be able to better interpret and understand disorganized, delayed and non-compliant behavior, which will equip them to respond safely and effectively.*

a.) Interactive Exercise: "Your Brain on Autism"

Students engage in an activity, in which they are assigned various actions designed to distract and disrupt a volunteer, who is attempting to complete a task.
Post-activity discussion includes having volunteer describe his or her level of disregulation and howit might have prevented him or her from complying normally.

b.) The "Neurotypical"/Non-Autistic Brain:

i. Sensory system: what does it do for us?
ii. Speech and language centers
iii. Mirror neurons: definition and purpose

c.) The Autistic Brain:

i. Sensory Integration Disorder: malfunctioning system – or a "flooding" or input (emotions, sensations, environmental stimuli)
ii. Facial "Blindness:" inability or impairment in recognizing facial expressions (anger vs. laughter, for example)
Impaired or absent language: word retrieval and motor planning, delayed responses.

d.) Interactive Exercise: "What's Your Name?"

Students pair up and engage in a brief exchange which illustrates the challenges of delayed speech and the implicit assumptions made when information isn't immediately forthcoming.

IV. Risks to the Autistic Population:

a.) Victimization: more than 35% of people with autism are crime victims
b.) Unintended injury: communication disorders can lead to misunderstandings with local community members, classmates, co-workers and first responders
c.) Unintended crimes: autistic people are very gullible and often don't understand when they are being manipulated
d.) Wandering/elopement:
i. Close to half of autistic children are prone to wandering and will attempt to roam from a safe environment
ii. Accidental drowning accounts for 91% of deaths reported in children with autism under the age of 14.

Traffic deaths come in second.

iii. Wandering is ranked as the most stressful autistic behavior by parents

iv. Children with autism are eight times more likely to elope between the ages of 7 and 10 than their typically developing siblings

V. Identifying Autism:

Learning objective: *Students will be able to provide descriptions of the core features of persons with autism, which will assist in identifying autism or possible developmental disability while responding to incidents.*

a.) SPEECH ISSUES

i. Limited or no ability to speak, may appear deaf.

ii. Echolalia: might echo or mimic what you're saying.

iii. Scripting: clips from movies, TV, songs.

iv. Speaking in a monotone or sing-song voice.

v. Highly suggestible and literal - for example, if they are taking vitamins or prescription medicine, might answer "Yes" to "Are you on drugs?"

b.) SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

i. Lack of eye contact or refusal to look you in the eye.

ii. Tantrums or escalated behavior for no apparent reason.

iii. Difficulty judging personal space - standing either too close or too far away.

iv. Odd, repetitive behavior ("stimming") including hand flapping, finger flicking, body rocking, spinning objects.

v. Inappropriate emotional responses, such as laughing during a serious situation.

c.) PHYSICAL ISSUES

i. Aversion to touch

ii. Inappropriate touching of self and others

iii. Self-injurious behavior: head banging, self-biting, pinching or scratching self (brief explanation of the purpose of this behavior, and how it differs from suicidal or self-harm intent)

iv. Over or under-sensitivity to pain.

v. No fear of danger – may run into traffic or towards a body of water.

V. Interactive Exercise: "General Knowledge Quiz with a Twist"

A basic quiz is distributed to the group. Before they can begin, officers are given prism glasses to wear (provided by instructor) and are required to write with their non-dominant hand. As they begin the test, a loud siren is played, along with a radio, which constantly changes stations and often remains on static. The officers are told to "speed it up" and advised they should be "halfway through by now." At the conclusion of the time allotted, they have to stop wherever they are. Most haven't completed the test.

The group describes their experiences and howthe challenges encountered might be similar to those diagnosed with autism.

VI. Responding to a Call:

- Look for an ID shoe tag, bracelet or necklace.

- Involve caregiver if situation allows. Ask how you can help them.
- Avoid more than one voice speaking at once. Assign a single point person and have that person speak to the individual. Speak calmly.
- Give as much space as possible.
- Approach from the side, rather than the front (peripheral vision feels safest for individual).
- Slow down/simplify speech. Allow plenty of response time.
- If safety allows, wait for an agitated individual to calm down.
- Allow the person to engage in repetitive behaviors (rocking, jumping, flapping, pacing). It's their method of self-regulation.
- Offer a tablet, smartphone or pen and paper to see if person can type or write. Ask for address, phone number, Mom and Dad's name, etc. Prepare to wait longer than normal.
- Take note of any special interests and use these to engage (Smartphones, T.V. shows, Disney, trains, snacks)
- Try physically modeling your commands. ("Do this")
- Use rewards: "If you do this, then you can see Mom/go home/get a snack."
- Use visual aids to instruct individual. For example:

1. *Get in car*
2. *Ride to police station*
3. *Have snack*
4. *See Mom*

VII. Restraint:

a.) Avoid positional asphyxia. People with autism may have a difficult time supporting their airways during restraint due to underdeveloped chest muscles.
b.) Officers should turn the person on their side to ensure airways are kept open.
c.) Keep in mind over 30% of people with autism are prone to seizures.
d.) Be prepared for resistance**.** People with autism may not understand the futility of struggling even when they are restrained.

VII. Group Breakout Session:

Using actual scenarios of autism and law enforcement encounters, students break off into small groups and
work out a response using these guidelines:

1. How do you keep yourself and others safe?
2. What to look for to assess behavior – could this be someone with autism?
3. Come up with strategies for de-escalating and resolving situation.

VIII: Live Interaction

Autistic participants arrive and present to the officers. They range in age from 16 – 22. Some are highly verbal and some are severely impacted (non-verbal). Their parents also speak about their children's experiences with law enforcement. Officers will interact directly with participants, if they choose.