

Retired officer gives autism safety talk across US

December 16 2014, by Mike Householder

A retired police officer from Michigan has made it his mission to educate first-responders and others about how to more effectively interact with people with autism spectrum disorder.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says one in 68 American children is affected by autism spectrum disorder, and research indicates autistic people are seven times more likely to come into contact with law enforcement.

Scott Schuelke, who has 25 years' worth of law enforcement experience, has trained close to 10,000 people at 300 training seminars across the state and country in the past three years. His seminars are designed to provide details to police, firefighters and other first responders about the group of developmental disabilities that can involve language and social impairments and unusual, repetitious behaviors.

"We're teaching (first-responders) how to communicate, how to interact, how to work with a family member or care provider," said Schuelke, a retired Lansing police sergeant who now works as an autism safety specialist with the Autism Alliance of Michigan.

Mark Boody, a police sergeant in the Detroit suburb of Novi, Michigan, who has attended Schuelke's seminars, wishes he'd known earlier what he now knows about the disorder.

"After the training, thinking back, 'Wow. I bet that person (I

encountered) could be someone with autism," Boody said. "Now, knowing that ahead of time, we're just not going to automatically assume the negative."

One of the ways those with ASD pop up on law enforcement's radar is when they wander from home—a terrifying experience that Kelly Roberts endured a few years ago.

Roberts' son, Blake, now 10, ran from their home in Howell, Michigan, while his mother was upstairs tending to his infant sibling.

A search party that involved a police dog as well as neighbors and family members eventually found Blake in a wooded area at the edge of a nearby lake.

"Thank goodness he didn't go in. Thank God. He at the time did not know how to swim," Kelly Roberts said.

It's a lesson that Schuelke tried to teach the few dozen first responders who attended a recent session at Eastern Michigan University, encouraging them to drive toward any nearby rivers, lakes or streams if they are called to the scene of a missing autistic child.

"People with autism are drawn to water," he told the attendees, many of whom were in uniform.

Boody said Schuelke's training helps him and his fellow officers fulfill the Novi PD's commitment to being "partners with our community."

"The more we know about autism, then the better service that we can provide," he said.

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Citation: Retired officer gives autism safety talk across US (2014, December 16) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-12-officer-autism-safety.html>

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