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The Autism Response Team: A Concept Whose Time Has Come

Dennis Debbaudt and Matt Brown



Imagine EMS and rescue personnel arriving at the scene of a horrible accident involving a group of children with autism waiting at a school bus stop. Several of the children do not speak, while others seem combative, apparently unwilling to allow rescuers to examine them. Without autism-specific training, the rescuers feel helpless and are at a loss as to how to manage this major emergency.

During an investigation in a nearby community, detectives questioning a young man with Asperger's syndrome are utterly confused. As they attempt to interview him, they note that he displays a marked lack of eye contact, something they have been trained to identify as a sign of deceit. He seems fixated on the overhead fluorescent lighting in the interview room. He smiles broadly at them, despite the fact that he

may be facing very serious charges. His responses seem blunt and inappropriate, and he often takes a long time to come up with answers to their questions.

In the next county, social services workers and police are investigating a complaint from the neighbor of a couple that has a young daughter with autism. The neighbors report that they often see the girl wandering down the street, seemingly oblivious to the inherent danger of such an act. They hear the girl screaming day and night on a regular basis, and have witnessed both parents in physical struggles with the child. When interviewing the child, the case workers and police notice bruises, and it seems that the child's answers to their questions are inconsistent one minute, and evasive the next.

With the dramatic rise of autism spectrum diagnoses, scenarios such as these are playing out all too often in cities and towns across the country. Police, fire/rescue, EMS, and other first responders currently lack the training to safely, fairly, and effectively handle situations involving persons on the autism spectrum. To make matters worse, our law enforcement and criminal justice systems are overwhelmed and overwrought. Understanding and accommodating spectrum-related behaviors and characteristics, and comprehending

the circumstances that may lead to confrontations with children and adults on the spectrum challenge not only the basic training and experience, but also the capacity of our first response (FR) and criminal justice system (CJS) agencies.

In this series of articles, we will describe the concept of an Autism Response Team (ART), and share information about how an ART might assist first response and criminal justice professionals as they go about their important duties.

What Is an ART?

The goal of an ART would be to ensure that positive, informed responses, and just resolutions that take into account the needs of everyone involved, are reached when an individual on the spectrum comes into contact with first responders during an emergency or CJS situation.

An ART would consist of a highly trained and experienced group of volunteers including "first in" personnel from police, fire rescue, emergency medical, hospital emergency room, and the 9-1-1 dispatch



office. It would also include “second tier” personnel involved in prosecution and defense, probation, corrections, and the mental health and autism professions who have expertise in spectrum related issues. It is important to note that ART volunteers would remain involved in a case from start (i.e., the charging and investigation phase) to finish (i.e., the probation and sentencing phase).

In order for the team to be effective, and accepted as a legitimate arm of the law enforcement community, it would have to have the “blessing” of state or regional FR and CJS agencies. Only then would the team be in the position to develop curricular models that could be shared and disseminated throughout the state and region.

First responders and criminal justice personnel who have both a personal connection to autism and an interest in becoming a part of the ART would be ideal members of the team—informed and motivated. Autism spectrum community advocacy groups can assist in the development of a team by identifying potential members. They can do this by getting the word out about the mission of the ART, and by canvassing their members through their newsletters, web sites, phone trees, and meetings. They can also assist by identifying knowledgeable professionals in the field of autism that can advise, assist, train, and generally join in the efforts of the ART.

The Critical Issue of Training

The importance of training cannot be overstated. In fact, members of the ART would be required to commit to intensive training in autism-related first response and CJS issues. These would include learning how to establish communica-

tions with a person on the spectrum, and understanding that in ASD a person’s body language might conflict with the verbal message. Training would also include learning de-escalation, restraint, and arrest techniques, and how to interview the victim-witness and interrogate the alleged offender. Other important aspects of training would include how to provide technical assistance to prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, and to probation, parole, and correctional officers.

Persons on the spectrum and their parents would serve a critical role in the training process. The former would share with criminal justice professionals their real-life experiences. These would serve as the basis for scenarios to be discussed and dissected in the training sessions. The parents would share the

techniques they employ to prevent and respond to meltdowns and other common emergencies.

The Case for Establishing ARTs

Perhaps you read the scenarios at the beginning of this article with a certain detachment, feeling that the situations described would affect a relatively few (albeit unfortunate) individuals on the spectrum. If so, please consider a situation that occurs quite frequently among both young children and adults on the spectrum: the act of wandering away from home. Such incidents are generally followed by frantic calls to 9-1-1 for assistance. When these individuals are found, the first responders that bring them back to their homes may observe signs that signal red flags regarding abuse or neglect: double locks on doors; interior doors with

Proposed Duties and Responsibilities of an ART

- Develop state-certified law enforcement and first response training models with test modules to be used at roll call, pre-shift, academy, and in-service training sessions
- Assist and consult FR and CJS personnel either on-site or via telephone or radio, and remain involved throughout every step of the case
- Develop and disseminate information that adults on the spectrum, family members, educators, and professional care providers can use to avoid and/or prepare themselves for an emergency, first response, or criminal justice contact
- Promote partnerships among those in the law enforcement professions, the spectrum community, and the community at-large.
- Assist in the creation of 9-1-1 data base alerts. Families whose loved ones wander can participate by volunteering information that can be placed in the data base so that dispatchers could alert first responders to specialized needs before they arrive on the scene.

Note: These database alerts have been suggested by first responders across the country as a key to safer, more effective, and more informed responses. Toward this end, the Autism Society of America has recently developed their *Safe and Sound* campaign materials: an autism first alert decal for homes and vehicles, and a personal information record form that families can fill out and keep handy in case of an emergency. (See related story on page 50.)

padlocks; windows locked tight; and a home in disarray. The wandering child or adult may even present with bruises, cuts, and scrapes. Who could blame a good first responder for thinking that there may have been a good reason for the individual's flight—that is, possible abuse? Faced with mandatory reporting of suspected abuse cases, the first responder would have no alternative but to contact social service professionals.

Many families not only struggle with chronic and dangerous wandering by their loved ones on the spectrum, but also with its consequences by those who do not understand ASD. Such consequences can include removing the child or adult from the home and placing him

or her in temporary foster care while an investigation is launched. When this occurs, parents are left scrambling to find an attorney to defend them against allegations of abuse. It should be obvious that trained ART members could assist FR, CJS, and families in this type of case at several points along the way.

One advantage of 21st century law enforcement and first response personnel is immediate communication. In communities where an ART exists—and where agencies are made aware of the specialized assistance the team can offer—it would only take seconds to contact the on-call ART member. This person could be invaluable in helping to assess the situation and render

advice. For example, the ART team member can help law enforcement personnel to understand that a person on the spectrum might carry bruises or scratches that occur as a result of clumsiness and inattention, combined with a high threshold for pain. He or she could also enlighten law enforcement personnel to the need for double locks and other precautionary measures to prevent wandering. Finally, the ART team member could also communicate that, for parents and care providers, keeping a well-ordered house comes in second to sleeping in shifts for a few hours a night in order to keep a weary and watchful eye on the doors of a wanderer who works tirelessly to become savvy enough to deactivate any and all safeguards.

Overall, an Autism Response Team would be an invaluable resource in the law enforcement field for *all* concerned. It can provide first responders and criminal justice professionals with the most up-to-date information on safety and risk management at the same time it enables them to make the best use of their time and resources. For those on the spectrum and their families it can help to ensure that difficult matters are handled with sensitivity and care. Finally, it can help prevent needless litigation from tying up courts and draining limited financial resources.

In the next issue of ASQ, we'll take a closer look at how an ART can assist in criminal justice situations involving the interview or interrogation of an alleged offender and that of the spectrum victim-witness. We will also discuss autism awareness issues that arise in prosecution and defense, and in the court room, probation and correctional settings. 🏠

BIO

Dennis Debbaudt is the proud father of Brad, a young man who has autism. In the 1980's, Dennis wrote for the Detroit News and worked with network television current affairs programs in the U.S., Canada, and United Kingdom. A professional investigator and journalist for 28 years, Dennis turned his attention to autism spectrum disorders in 1987 after his son was diagnosed. He wrote *Family-School Liaison: Safety and Risk Support* with Walter Coles for ASQ's Summer 2004 inaugural issue.

Since 1993, he's authored numerous articles and books including *Autism, Advocates and Law Enforcement Professionals: Recognizing and Reducing Risk Situations for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* for Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London UK (2002) and *Contact with Individuals with Autism: Effective Resolutions* with Darla Rothman for the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (2001). Dennis was instrumental in the development of the state of Maryland's Police and Correctional Training Commissions curriculum *Why Law Enforcement Needs to Recognize Autism*. He has consulted to ABC News 20/20 for a segment about false confession and autism, and has presented his training session for Department of Homeland Security instructors at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) at Glynco, Georgia.

Dennis will present frequently this year for law enforcement, criminal justice and spectrum audiences. He can be contacted through his web site www.autismriskmanagement.com Dennis resides with his family in Port St. Lucie, Florida.

Matt Brown has been in the law enforcement field for 18 years, and currently serves as a U.S. Probation Officer in Portland, Maine. He and his wife Nancy have three children, Elizabeth, Matthew Jr, and Grace. Their middle child, Matthew, Jr., has been diagnosed with high functioning autism. Approximately three years ago, after meeting Dennis Debbaudt and attending one of his "train the trainer" seminars, Matt developed a program in Maine to train law enforcement, fire/rescue/EMS and other first responders about autism. Since then, he has traveled all over the state (and in Canada) as a volunteer for the Autism Society of Maine, providing this training. He is currently working with the Autism Society of Maine to get legislation passed this spring, to require police and prosecutors to receive autism training. The Autism Society of Maine is currently trying to secure a grant to pursue the idea of establishing an ART (as described in the Debbaudt / Brown article) in Maine.

