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Sonoma County law enforcement and people with autism gather to teach each other



Santa Rosa Police Officer Orlando Macias lets Cameron Thompson, who is autistic, speak into his patrol vehicle PA system following the Be Safe training program for law enforcement, and individuals with autism spectrum disorders, in Santa Rosa on Thursday, September 21, 2017. (Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat)

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Volunteering from the audience, Andrew Kirk of Sonoma sat on a chair on stage at a Sonoma County church for a demonstration of a hypothetical arrest.

Cotati Police Officer Tyler Wardle held him at gunpoint — using a fake rubber weapon in a day-glow orange — while Petaluma Police Officer Tyler Saldanha pulled his arms behind his back and applied handcuffs.

It was a scenario that, in reality, would be distressing to most anyone. But for people like Kirk, who is autistic, being handled by police brings added challenges when almost any human touch can be over-stimulating.

As Wardle and Saldanha ended the demonstration and removed the handcuffs, Kirk lifted his arms in the air, declaring to applause from the crowd: “I am the test pilot.”

The scene was jovial and light-hearted Thursday at Spring Hills Community Church in Fulton, where a training event brought together people with autism and law enforcement from across Sonoma County. But the gathering of about 200



Geordi Cates, right, who is autistic, and Sonoma County Regional Parks Ranger Beth Wyatt, take a safety promise during the Be Safe training program.



Nathan Dyer, left, who is autistic, makes a comment about a lesson, while Sonoma County Sheriff's Deputy Anthony Diehm listens, during the Be Safe training.

people, including law enforcement officers, individuals with autism and staff from several nonprofit programs and school districts, had a lesson of life-and-death importance: How people with special needs, including those who are autistic, and police can prepare for the chance they may encounter one another in public.

“It’s a two-way education,” said Lt. David House, an organizer of the program and administrator with the Sonoma County Jail whose autistic son, Isa, 21, was on hand.

For people diagnosed with autism, the basic elements of an emergency situation, from the startling nature

of a patrol car’s lights and sirens to a police officer’s commanding voice, are circumstances that can cause great distress.

For law enforcement, a stranger’s unclear communication or lack of eye contact — behaviors that can be associated with autism or other developmental disorders — can raise suspicions of intoxication or ulterior motives.

Worst-case-scenario misunderstandings have played out in the national spotlight. In a recent case in Arizona, an officer mistook a 14-year-old autistic boy’s attempt to calm himself — with repetitive, self-stimulating movements referred to as “stimming” — as a sign of drug intoxication. The officer’s body camera recorded video showing how the officer misjudged the situation and failed to understand when the boy plainly told him what he was doing.

He panicked as the officer roughly took him to the ground. A caregiver eventually intervened, and at one point said to the officer, “You don’t know anything about autism, huh?”

The condition manifests differently in each individual — giving rise to the term Autism Spectrum Disorder — and there are varied strategies people and police officers can use to ensure their encounters, however unlikely, are more successful, experts said Thursday.

The training was the second day of a program organized by House, the sheriff’s lieutenant, in collaboration with Becoming Independent, a nonprofit serving people with disabilities throughout the North Bay. They brought up a mother-son team, Emily and Tom Iland from Santa Clarita, whose “Be Safe” interactive program teaches people with autism what to expect when they interact with law enforcement.

From the stage within the youth ministry building, Tom Iland spoke about simple concepts to keep in mind when encountering police:

Stop and remain calm. Follow police orders. Keep your hands to yourself and don’t touch a police officer’s tools, especially the gun. Refrain from talking if you are arrested and ask for a lawyer.

“We’re doing this because we want to have better communities and prevent problems,” Iland said.

These and other tips were explained in a video that included actors and officers playing out scenarios showing what can go right and wrong in several cases involving police and people with autism.

The scenarios included a pair of friends who left a store with the shopping cart and didn’t know they were stealing. Officers explained to them why it was wrong to take the cart.

In another scene, a skateboarding boy was stopped at gunpoint because he matched the description of a person who robbed a store. The boy followed orders, and the police quickly determined he had nothing to do with the robbery.

“When police are doing their jobs, they sometimes tell people what to do,” the narrator said.

In the church, law enforcement officers were paired up with civilians, and between videos they partook in a series of activities, including a board game to learn what to do in situations like when you’re locked out of your home.

“If your teacher was hurt, who would you call?” Petaluma Police Officer Tyler Saldanha said.

“Call police,” said Damon Blackwell of Santa Rosa.

Daniel Cortez, a correctional deputy in the Sonoma County Jail, said he has worked in the mental health unit of the jail for seven of his 12 years with the department. The concepts conveyed Thursday hold true more broadly for people with a variety of disabilities or mental illnesses, he said.

“The goal was to help us understand the importance of making accommodations for people with disabilities, like speaking more slowly — and how it’s different from giving someone special treatment,” Cortez said.

Sonoma County Regional Parks Ranger Beth Wyatt, who has two children on the autism spectrum, said she felt the program was well-crafted to capture the curiosity of people like her children.

Wyatt, who noted the Regional Parks system had training focused on autism last spring, said next time she will recommend they invite people on the autism spectrum to participate.

“Officers can learn so much from one-on-one interactions with people,” Wyatt said.



Andrew Kirk, who is autistic, volunteers to show how to comply with police officer commands, as Petaluma Police Officer Tyler Saldanha, right, and Cotati Police Officer Tyler Wardle pretend to arrest him during the Be Safe training program.

