AUTISM CHARACTERISTICS THAT IMPACT SAFETY

• MELTDOWNS
  - Most dangerous for Officers

• WANDERING
  - Most dangerous to person with ASD

• SENSORY ISSUES

• PROCESSING ISSUES
DEFINITION –

• ‘An intense response to overwhelming situations’.

• Occurs when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioral control.
• A meltdown is not the same as a “temper-tantrum” and the two should not be confused.
• Tantrums happen when a person is trying to get something he wants or needs.

• Meltdowns occur when a person feels overwhelmed by his feelings or surroundings or frustration with communication.
This loss of control can be expressed:

• **Verbally**
  - Shouting
  - Screaming
  - Crying

• **Physically**
  - Kicking
  - Lashing out
  - Biting

• **Both ways**
COMMON TRIGGERS:

• Sensory or Processing overload

• Sudden change in routine/transitions

• Anxiety/Frustration

• Communication Difficulties
MELTDOWNS

WARNING SIGNS –

• Stimming increases
• Pacing back & forth
• Echolalia
MELTDOWNS

WARNING SIGNS –

• Lack of speech

• No or limited eye contact

• Loss of motor skills
Autism Meltdowns

a few suggestions on how to handle one...
MELTDOWNS

RESPONSE –

• Ensure officer safety as well as their safety (Make the scene safe)

• Attempt to distract in early stage of meltdown.

• Do not stop a person from stimming.
MELTDOWNS

RESPONSE –

• Reduce stimuli
  - Remove person from overstimulating location when possible
  - Turn off TV
  - Turn down portable radio
  - Turn off red/blue strobes
  - BODY CAM
MELTDOWNS

RESPONSE –

• Speak quietly

• Keep verbal response minimal.

• Provide Time / Distance / Shielding
  - Contain/Isolate when appropriate
Following a meltdown, the person with autism may retreat. They may seek alone time, fall asleep, try to pretend that nothing happened, or apologize.

B. Myles, PhD, 2005
Neuro-typical people have a wide emotional gap between calm and rage.

For persons with ASD, the emotional gap between calm and rage can be very narrow.

Officers should be very alert for a sudden flash back to rage after having calmed down a person with ASD.
People on the Autism Spectrum Describe What a Meltdown Feels Like
• If possible, try to find out from parents or caregiver what communication tools work best and what services they receive
• People with ASD are concrete thinkers so direct, clear speech is the most effective
Example – “Come over here and stand by me”
• Be direct and to the point, avoid slang and nuance...
  Example - “Please sit down” or “Sit in this chair”, not “Take a seat”...
• If possible, use visual aids, especially with those who are non-verbal or who don’t understand

• Visual direction with instructions can also be effective...

  Example - Sitting down while patting the seat next to you and saying “Sit down”
• Use their name, if you know it...

• Attempt to stay at the same level, try not to tower over them...
Persons living with Autism Spectrum Disorder do not process at the same speed as peers.

Too much input can overwhelm and overload.
PROCESSING ISSUES

Consider that you may need too...

• Provide time to respond to questions
• Repeat questions/instructions as needed
• Break down instructions into small steps
• Most studies, facts and figures regarding persons living with ASD and wandering address children.

• Some will outgrow this tendency, but many will not.

• Wandering among persons living with ASD can happen across a lifetime.
WANDERING AND AUTISM

STATISTICS

• Wandering by persons with autism (especially children) is common and dangerous

• 49% of children with an ASD have a tendency to wander from safe environments - (4 times Natl. Avg)

Journal of Pediatrics
• When a child, under age 5, with autism is missing long enough for police to be contacted, nearly 60% of the cases ended in death*

*Natl. Autism Assoc.
A Missing/Wandering Child call involving a child with ASD are truly a life and death situation. (Priority-1 Response)
Children with ASD, age 14 and younger, cause of accidental death...

Drowning - 91%
WATER DANGERS
SEARCH WATER FIRST

- Nearby water sources?
- Ask about neighborhood pools and bodies of water
- Ask about Water obsession
WANDERING AND AUTISM

TYPES OF WANDERING

GOAL-DIRECTED:

• Seeking to get to favorite spot or place of obsession.

• “Wandering with a purpose”

• Enjoys exploring
TYPES OF WANDERING

BOLTING/FLEEING:

• Getting away from something, due to anxiety or excitement

• Sudden reaction to sensory or processing overload

• Fleeing noise, bright lights, clutter...
MISSING PERSON INVESTIGATIONS

Try to OBTAIN INFORMATION such as –

• Are they wandering or fleeing?
• Where have they wandered to before?
MISSING PERSON INVESTIGATIONS

Try to OBTAIN INFORMATION such as –

• Can we track their location?

• What is their communication level?
FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LETHALITY

• Attracted/Obsessed with water sources

• No sense of danger

• Not properly dressed for weather conditions.
FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LETHALITY

• **May not feed themselves or drink liquids.**
  Risk of dehydration.

• **Sensory Processing Issues.**
  - May prevent them from feeling too hot or too cold, a sharp object or similar.

• **May not understand safety rules**
  - Crossing the street
CRIME VICTIMS WITH AUTISM

• Persons living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have difficulty picking up social cues and understanding others thoughts and intentions. Naïve to dangers and ill intentions of others

• This makes them vulnerable to a range of crimes from fraud and theft to more violent crimes
Persons with ASD are also generally taught compliance from a very young age, making them easy targets for abuse and victimization.

They are also FAR more likely to be victim than perpetrator.
Victimized up to 10 times more than general population

Particularly vulnerable to sexual assault. Approx. 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls suffer from sexual abuse before the age of 18

Predators target people with intellectual disabilities because they know they are easily manipulated and will have difficulty testifying later
• 97% of perpetrators were known/trusted by victim

• 44% of perpetrators had a service-related relationship with victim - residential staff, personal care attendants, transportation providers
HOW DOES THIS IMPACT US?

- Calls for service
  - Sex assaults
  - Fraud
  - Bullying

- Difficulty obtaining statements
- What Else?
CASE STUDIES
WHAT HAPPENED?

• Was this a good tactic?
• Why was this effective?
• What did you like?
• What did you not like?
WHAT HAPPENED?

CONTACT/COVER –

• Was back-up available and utilized?

- Yes, Deputy Loftis states his Zone partner was on scene during this incident.
I spoke to Deputy Loftis, via telephone, he related the following:

• Upon arrival, he first assessed the situation for officer safety.
He next asked himself “How can I divert his (Bubba’s) energy in a positive manner?”

Deputy Loftis states what worked well for him during this incident was to “Be human. Recognize threats but step back to listen for a second” and to “Listen at the same level.”
Prior to this incident, Deputies had responded to this location multiple times for DV related calls.

Since this incident, Deputy Loftis keeps in contact with Bubba’s mother, but there have not been any further 911 DV responses.
WHAT HAPPENED?

LAWFUL PURPOSE –

- Did Officers have enough for an ITA?
Emergency Detention RCW 71.05

- 2) A peace officer may take or cause such person to be taken into custody and immediately delivered to ... evaluation and treatment facility...

- (b) ...suffering from a mental disorder...presents an imminent likelihood of serious harm...in imminent danger because of being gravely disabled...

- "Gravely disabled“...as a result of a mental disorder...Is in danger of serious physical harm...failure to provide for his or her essential human needs of health or safety...
Emergency Detention RCW 71.05

**Good Faith Exemption**

No peace officer responsible for detaining a person pursuant to this chapter shall be civilly or criminally liable for performing duties with regard to the decision to detain a person for evaluation and treatment:

PROVIDED, That such duties were performed in good faith and without gross negligence.
WHAT HAPPENED?

LAWFUL PURPOSE –

• Absent ITA, what were the officers options?
- Mobile Crisis Team?
WHAT HAPPENED?

LAWFUL PURPOSE –

• Did they have PC?

• Probable Cause does not necessarily mean that a booking is required
  - Arrest, transport to precinct for further investigation?
  - Crisis Diversion Facility?
WHAT HAPPENED?

**LAWFUL PURPOSE** –

- When can police detain someone with ASD?
- Usual standards apply
  - Reasonable Suspicion
  - Probable Cause
  - Community Caretaking
  - DV mandatory arrest standards still apply
WHAT HAPPENED?

LAWFUL PURPOSE –

• Just because you have a developmental delay, does not mean you cannot commit a crime*
WHAT HAPPENED?

* Handcuffing –

- Persons with ASD are prone to seizures, this places them at risk of injury from restraints...
- How do we mitigate?
Re-watch the video of the Buckeye PD incident; prior to force.

Ask yourself...Could what you have learned today likely changed the outcome?
• Police contacts involving persons living with Autism Spectrum Disorder can be very challenging.

• This is why it is essential to provide officers with the proper training on best practices during police contacts and investigations involving persons living with ASD.
• It is equally important to provide officers adequate information on resources available to them and the public.

• Learning and understanding these fundamentals increases our likelihood of success during Contacts, Calls for Service and Investigations involving persons living with Autism Spectrum Disorder.
Washington Links

http://depts.washington.edu/uwautism/
NATIONAL AUTISM RESOURCES/LINKS

https://www.autismspeaks.org/
http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/
https://www.autism.com/

http://awaare.nationalautismassociation.org/
https://www.thecenterforautism.org/resources/
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