



Training helps first responders connect with autistic community

Published: Wednesday, April 25th 2018, 6:08 pm CDT

Updated: Wednesday, April 25th 2018, 6:08 pm CDT

By **Lindsey Connell, Reporter** CONNECT

HUNTSVILLE, AL (WAFF) - An interactive course for law enforcement and first responders had a very special focus in Madison County on Wednesday.

Members of multiple agencies learned how to better interact with those with autism and other developmental disabilities.

The "First Responder Interactive Training" was made possible by a small group project by Leadership Huntsville/Madison County 31, The Riley Center and Interaction Advisory Group, LLC at The Freedom in Huntsville.

All disciplines of first responders participated in the program, including the Madison County Sheriff's Office, Huntsville Police Department, Madison Police Department, HEMSI, Huntsville Fire & Rescue, Madison County Fire and Madison Fire & Rescue.

"We learned very important lessons, raising our awareness and improving our communication skills when interacting with those with autism, their families and caregivers," said Lt. Donny Shaw with the Madison County Sheriff's Office.

In the United States, one in five people live with special need. Autism is the nation's fastest growing developmental disorder with a child receiving a new diagnosis every 20 minutes. The latest nationwide research from the Centers for Disease Control states that one in every 68 children has an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. The prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in Alabama is higher, with an increase of 82% over the past five years.

"It's a disorder that impacts millions of children and adults and each one is an individual and each one may have different reactions, particularly in pressure-filled situations and that's normally where you have a first responder who comes onto a scene," explained John Fellows, chief executive officer for APT Research, Inc.

There were a lot of key takeaways for those participating in the training.

"I know a lot more on how to really deal with somebody who is in a crisis whenever we respond to a home. There were a lot of good points on how they calm themselves and the things we can do to work through that so everybody stays safe," said Sgt. Matthew Elliff with the Madison County Sheriff's Office.

"They've given out some paperwork so whenever we have contact in the future with a new person that has autism, we can get some information from them, take it back to our dispatch center and they can load it into the system so that if we have to respond again, we already know there's a person with autism," added Lt. Shaw.

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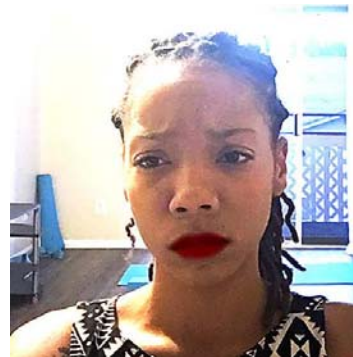
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