

Arming police – with information Seeking to avoid a tragedy, families are registering young people who have communication disorders with law enforcement authorities

(GLOBE AND MAIL)

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In a panic, the mother of a teenage boy called Ottawa police. Her son, who has autism, was worked up and chasing her around their home with a knife. Moments later when police arrived, no one screamed at the boy to drop the weapon. No one approached with gun drawn.

Instead, he was asked calmly about his favourite hockey team. Within minutes, the situation had cooled down enough that an officer could take the knife from the boy before taking him to a hospital.

Police knew how to de-escalate a crisis with this boy last year because his family had submitted information about him – and his love of hockey – to Ottawa's voluntary autism registry, according to Zoye Coburn, a trainer and outreach worker with the Ottawa Police Service. Launched as a pilot project in 2010 through a partnership between police and the local chapter of Autism Ontario, the program was recently made permanent. It is one of a handful that have sprung up across the country since the first one began in Miramichi, N.B., about two years ago.

Before the registry, there was no formal way to relay information to police about a person's diagnosis or how to defuse a confrontation. Without knowing the Ottawa boy's diagnosis and that he found hockey talk calming, police may have responded as they are trained to do in threatening situations involving a weapon – by using force, Ms. Coburn said.

"Our officers are just that, they're police officers, they're not medical professionals," Ms. Coburn said. "They're not in a position to diagnose people and record it." The goal of the registry is to inform police that a child or adult may not be able to speak to them or follow commands – often the case for someone with autism spectrum disorder, a term that describes a range of increasingly common disorders that affect social interaction and communication.

Police are finding themselves increasingly interacting with people in crises. Factors including deinstitutionalization of care have meant that more people with mental illness, or disorders such as autism, are coming into contact with police. Arming officers with information about a person's condition is one way to prevent harm – both to the officer and the individual.

For instance, for some people with autism, sirens and flashing lights can trigger a negative reaction. "The more information our police officers have when they're responding to a call for service, the better it is for everybody," said Ms. Coburn.

Some family members sign up those in their care in the hope that if they wander from home and go missing they will be found more quickly, because police have a photo as well as information about their favourite places. In Ottawa, about 300 people are signed up, and organizers are considering expanding the registry to include people with other non-verbal conditions.

In Miramichi, Dianne Pineau signed up her son, Kenzie Smith, with the local autism registry after he wandered away from day-care. "It was scary enough I wanted to register him right away," she said. Now 8, Kenzie is still prone to roaming. He doesn't have a natural fear of dangers such as traffic and bodies of water, and as he gets older, his mother also worries about how he would communicate with police. "He might not know how to respond," she said. "What do you see on TV when people see cops? They run. So he might see a police officer and say, 'Okay, I gotta run.'"

For a one-time fee of \$25 to join the registry, she knows her car, home and son's name are flagged to police and other first responders. Kenzie also has an ID card that he carries with him. That way, if police are ever called to her home or she's in a crash with Kenzie in the car, police will know he might react differently than other kids his age. On the form, she told police that Kenzie loves to talk about computer games and Lego Batman. He also hates leaving the house, something that emergency responders should know if there's a fire.

Miramichi Constable Todd Chadwick helped develop the registry with the group Autism Resources Miramichi Incorporated. He cited a 2009 case in which police believed an autistic teenager was intoxicated. The 18-year-old was arrested and not allowed to call his mother after he was put in a St. John's lockup overnight. He had been unresponsive to an officer's questions about why he was walking in the middle of a road. He was returned home the next morning after he was reported missing by his mother, who later filed a complaint.

Constable Chadwick said the registry helps to avoid this type of situation. Instead of an interaction with an autistic person "becoming a very complicated file, a liability for us, or it might be a criminal case . . . we're able to reduce that," he said.

Last fall, Windsor, Ont., started an autism registry after Michelle Helou wrote to police asking for their help. Her 14-year-old son Noah is autistic and non-verbal. Police had responded to her home once, thinking there was a domestic disturbance when Noah was having a "meltdown." After a bit of convincing, police left, but Ms. Helou worried about what could have happened if she hadn't been there.

"[With Noah] there's no communication skills, there's very little eye contact," she said, adding he doesn't like to be touched. "He might get aggressive if he's handled wrong." Thirty-two people have been signed up so far for the Windsor registry, said Ms. Helou, who works with Autism Services Inc. Some parents initially had privacy

concerns about the group having access to the information, she said, but those have subsided as people learned that only police have access to the files.

"This is a win-win situation. . . . It's not like labelling them, it's here to help everybody."