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HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE

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House of Representatives
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE HEARING
Topic: Autism Awareness
Abington School District Administration Building – Abington, PA
October 2, 2019

AGENDA

- 2:00 p.m. Welcome and Opening Remarks
- 2:10 p.m. Panel One:
- Stacy Nonnemacher, PhD
Clinical Director for Office of Developmental Disabilities
Pennsylvania Department of Human Services
 - Patricia Golden
Outreach Specialist
Montgomery County Office of Developmental Disabilities
- 2:30 p.m. *Questions & Answers*
- 2:50 p.m. Panel Two:
- Judy Bomze
Director of Student Services
Abington School District
 - Joe McCleery
Executive Director of Academic Programs
Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support
- 3:10 p.m. *Questions & Answers*
- 3:30 p.m. Closing Remarks

Improving Interactions Between Emergency Responders and Individuals with Autism in
the Commonwealth

Stacy L. Nonnemacher, Ph.D.

Clinical Director

Office of Developmental Disabilities

House Democratic Policy Committee

October 2, 2019



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Good afternoon. I am Dr. Stacy Nonnemacher, and I serve as the Clinical Director for the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) in the Department of Human Services (DHS). For almost thirteen years, I have worked for the Bureau of Supports for Autism and Special Populations. In that time, I have consulted in many situations in which adults with autism have engaged with emergency responders. I am pleased to appear before the House Democratic Policy Committee to discuss Representative Sanchez's proposal that seeks to improve interactions between emergency responders and individuals with autism by offering a voluntary designation of the autism diagnosis on driver's licenses or state-issued identification cards.

Based on a 2011 Pennsylvania Autism Census, we know that there are approximately 55,000 people with autism receiving services and living in Pennsylvania. We are well aware of the potential for interaction between these individuals, as with any citizen in the Commonwealth, and emergency responders. While there are no reliable databases highlighting exactly how many people with autism have engaged with emergency responders, a large survey conducted in Pennsylvania by the Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training (ASERT) collaborative, funded by DHS, revealed that 26% of respondents have had police/justice system interaction. Most of those interactions involved police being called or police stopping the individual for something other than a traffic violation. The caveat here is that this survey represents only a sample of people with autism in Pennsylvania. This survey does not include a more diverse section of the population that is typically accounted for in higher rates of interaction in the general population, such as lower-income individuals.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a group of complex neurodevelopmental disorders with a broad range of patterns of behavior and difficulties with social communication and interaction. The term “spectrum” refers to the wide range of symptoms, skills, and levels of disability in functioning that can occur in individuals with autism. Some individuals with autism may have language capabilities, while others may not. Some individuals with autism may have skills to engage with others, while others may not. This wide range of functioning can be very challenging when engaging with people with autism. In fact, even those individuals with autism who have language capabilities and may seemingly be able to communicate may lose that ability in potentially stressful situations such as those that warrant attention from an emergency responder. Being mindful of these nuances and knowing universal ways to engage with individuals with this diagnoses could lead to the best possible outcomes particularly in emergency situations. Some traits of autism like sensory issues, anxiety, lack of eye contact, difficulty regulating emotions, inability to read other’s non-verbal cues, inability to understand abstract concepts, trouble with language or stimming (i.e., a form of self-stimulation) can all be misinterpreted as defiant or unlawful, or may generally meet the profile of someone emergency responders may label as suspicious.

Often parents and supporters rely on local authorities’ familiarity with the individual as a strategy to avoid uncomfortable interactions. That is, local authorities may be aware of the individual due to personal outreach from supporters or previous situations that warranted their attention. This is the best-case scenario when future situations may arise, but it is not always available for people with autism who may not be receiving support from others. Through the efforts of ODP and partners at ASERT,

we have endeavored to provide universal autism training to justice personnel across all points of justice intersection. To date, approximately 190 trainings have been conducted, training over 6,500 people in-person. We have more work to do since we are up against potential biases toward individuals with autism based on misleading information, for example, linking autism to mass shootings. Additional support and funds to DHS to sustain this training initiative is a positive step towards a more common understanding of ASD and the development and adoption of more productive protocols for interaction with these individuals. While there is a critical need to expand this initial work, we also a need to support individuals with autism so that responders can interact with them appropriately in emergency situations. Having identification that designates their diagnosis would be a helpful tool for individuals with autism and could potentially explain behaviors that may raise red flags or be considered suspicious for emergency responders.

Thank you for your interest in improving interactions between emergency responders and individuals with autism, and for the opportunity to provide testimony. I welcome any questions the committee may have at this time.