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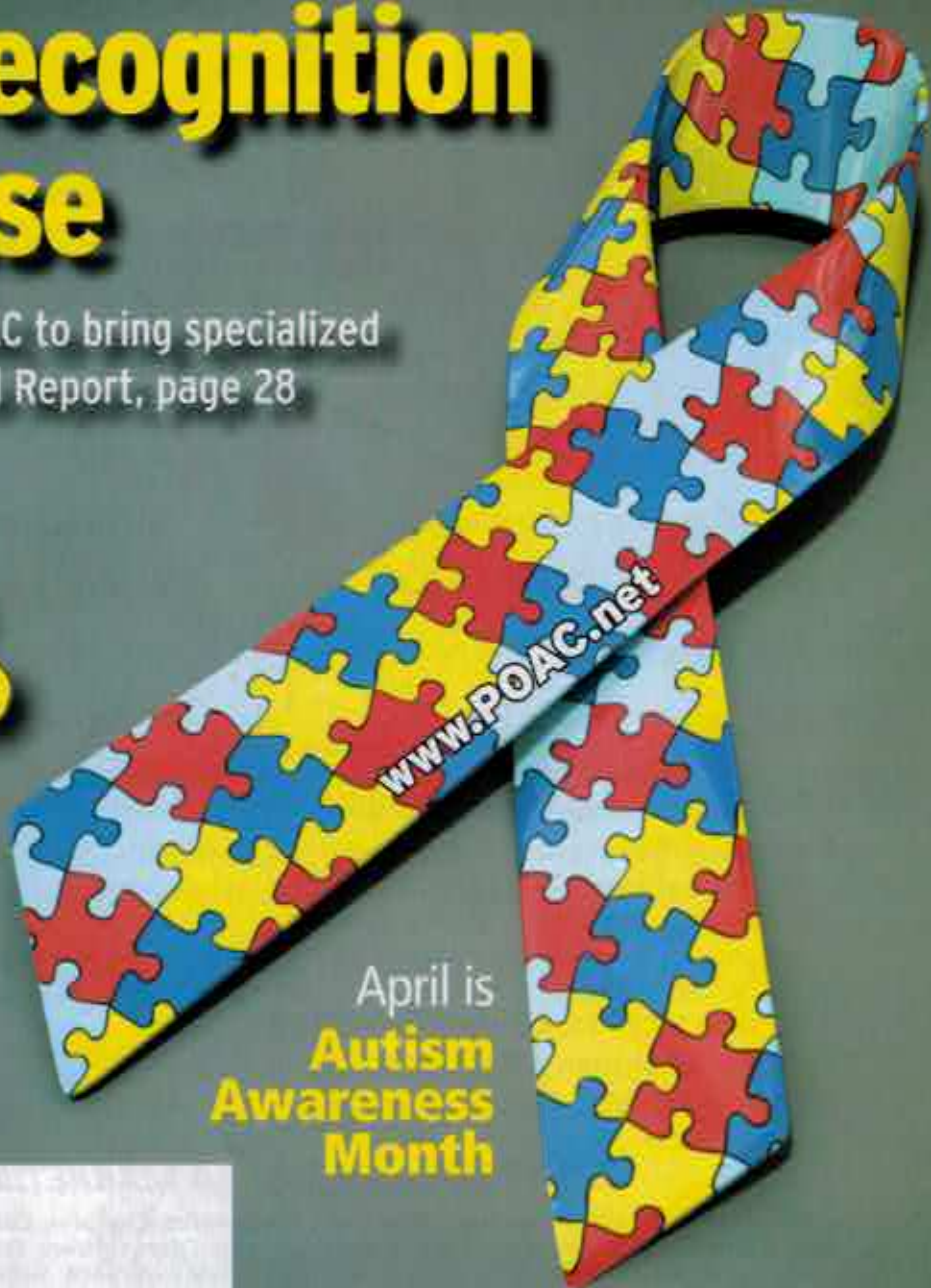
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Autism Recognition & Response

NJ State PBA works with POAC to bring specialized training to members. Special Report, page 28



April is
**Autism
Awareness
Month**



"I remembered Christopher had an attraction toward this lake. When they got to the lake, they found Christopher floating in the middle. An Asbury Park Police Sergeant jumped in and rescued him. At that moment when my son almost died, I knew we had to do something."

GARY WEITZEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PARENTS OF AUTISTIC CHILDREN (POAC)

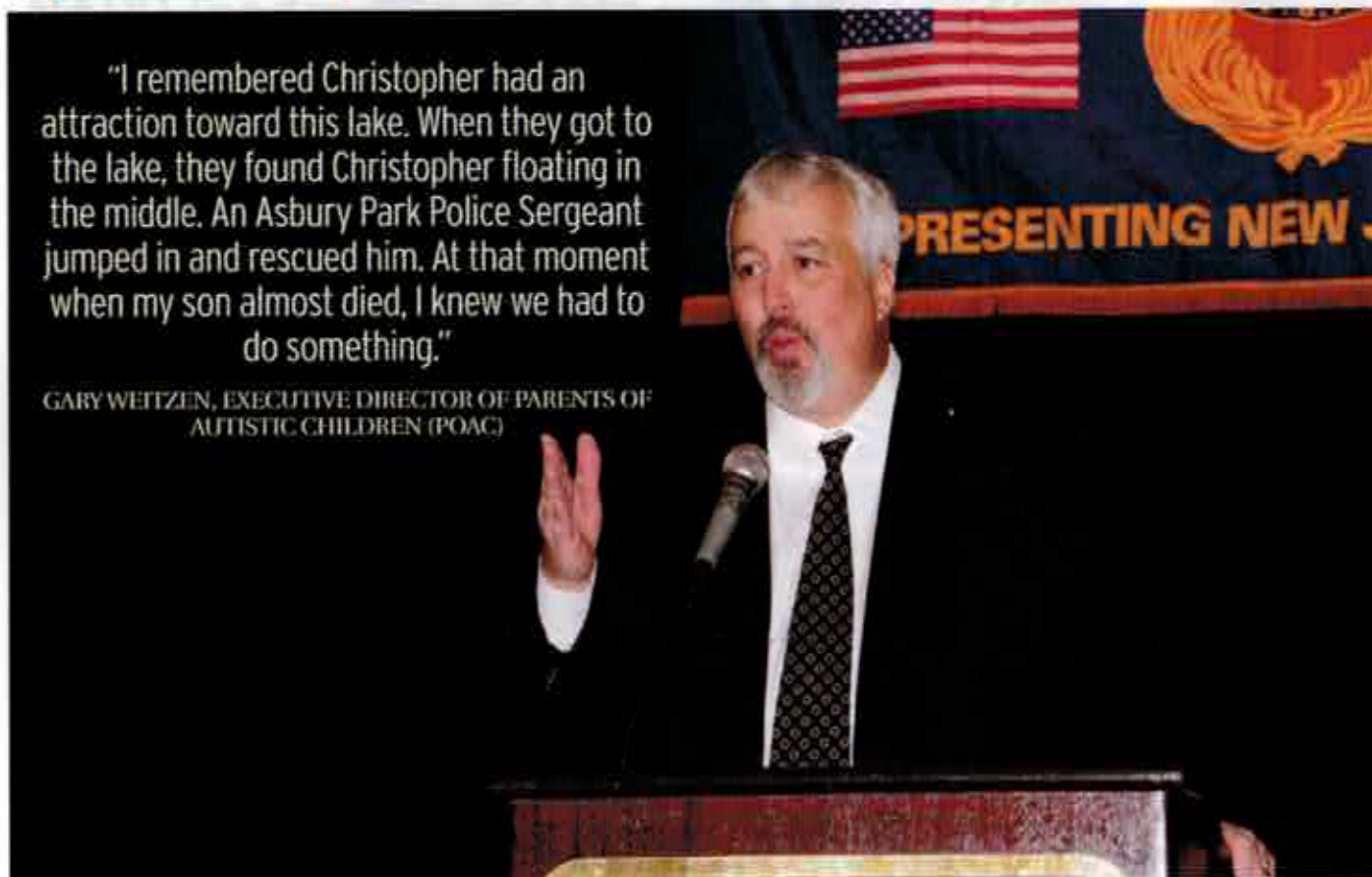


PHOTO BY JOHN HULSE

Autism Awareness

Responding to individuals with autism is becoming a more prevalent situation for law enforcement officers. As a result, The NJ State PBA is asking all agencies to answer the call for more training.

■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

Two weeks after completing the Autism Recognition & Response Specialized Training for Law Enforcement Officers, the Marlboro Police Department received that terrifying call. A 12-year-old girl with autism and no verbal ability went missing. Officers immediately spread out to search but had no clue where to look.

"During the training, they told us that a lot of kids with autism are often drawn to bodies of waters – pools, ponds and lakes," recalled Marlboro Sergeant John Loyer.

Suddenly, officers began jumping six-foot fences where they

hoped to find pools on the other side. Finally, about three blocks from the girl's house, an officer found her. She was in the pool. On the verge of drowning.

"They would not have looked there had it not been for the training," explained Gary Weitzen, Executive Director of Parents of Autistic Children (POAC), the statewide organization that runs the Specialized Training for Law Enforcement Officers.

Weitzen has trained approximately 15,000 police officers in the nuances needed to respond to individuals with autism and to cases involving individuals with autism. Weitzen says the objective of the training is to increase the safety of the officers and the individuals with autism. Loyer calls the training life-altering.

Not approaching individuals with autism from behind or knowing they are attracted to water are two bits of the plethora of "amazing knowledge" Loyer says the training provides. Clearly, this is training every member should have, which NJ State PBA President Tony Wieners and his Executive Board Members certainly realized when they decided to have Weitzen make a rousing presentation about Autism Awareness at the PBA Mini-Convention in March.

"I'm sitting on the podium watching our members react to Gary's presentation and I can't remember when I've seen them so engaged, so focused," President Wieners remarked. "When we can do something that saves lives of both members of the community and our members, then we should do everything we can to make sure they get this type of training and education."

Weitzen's presentation was so hypnotic that as word quickly spread of its impact, members rushed back into the meeting room like Yankees fans scurrying from the concession stand when The Mick was coming up to bat.

"That's the response I tend to get from officers," Weitzen adds.

Raising Awareness

Here's what they are responding to:

New Jersey has the highest autism rate ever documented in the U.S. According to the Center for Disease Control, the average rate is one in every 88 kids being classified as having Autism Spectrum Disorders, which include autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Asperger's Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Delay (PDD). New Jersey has a 1-in-49 rate, and for boys it is 1-in-29. Autism and ASD is more common in kids than pediatric cancer, diabetes and AIDS combined.

Autism impairs a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. Common abnormalities include echolalia (immediate or delayed repeating of information), unconventional word use and unusual tone, pitch and inflection. Currently, there are no effective means to prevent autism, no fully effective treatments and no cure. Individuals with autism are seven times more likely to come in contact with police than their typical peers, according to the FBI.

Weitzen reports hearing from departments about repeated calls of individuals wandering away from home and winding up in near-drowning situations, teenage girls with autism running out of the house naked and some individuals with autism so big and so violent that they were physically injuring their parents or care-givers when throwing a tantrum. He tells every group about the 37-year-old adult with autism out in a store "scripting" or talking to himself. The store clerk called the police thinking the individual could have been an escaped mental patient or on drugs.

"It's a situation that could have gone really bad if the officer didn't know what he was dealing with," Weitzen explained. "We've been bombarded by calls like these from departments asking, 'do you have anything that can help us,' and we're getting bombarded by calls from parents of autistic children reporting that, 'my son just got involved with the police. Is there something you can do?'"

Autism Hits Home

Weitzen had a nice business going as an insurance risk manager until his life changed about 15 years ago. His son, Christopher, had been diagnosed with autism and was non-verbal at 3-years-old. At 5, Christopher went missing. His wife called 9-1-1, and he ran down the street screaming Christopher's name.

"I remembered Christopher had an attraction toward this lake," Weitzen said.

When they got to the lake, they found Christopher floating in the middle. An Asbury Park Police Sergeant jumped in and rescued him.

"At that moment when my son almost died, I knew we had to do something."

Weitzen went back to graduate school and got a degree in counseling psychology. He hooked up with POAC, which at the time was a local non-profit, and with his wife and Christopher's teacher went to training. The free training was "like someone switched a light switch," he said. Christopher turned 19 last month. He now talks and engages people with a keen sense of humor.

"The way Gary explains it with that story about his son – wow," Loyer added. "If you have a chance to go, even if you're not a first responder, the information you get is amazing."

POAC is the largest provider of autism training in New Jersey. Every training is free. Primary funding comes from fundraising, mostly through the walk-a-thons they sponsor in counties around the state. Weitzen said that 95 cents of every dollar raised goes toward children with autism. So the first response to help really could be participating in a walk-a-thon near you (see box page 30.).

In response to the calls from police departments, Weitzen turned to his background in the military and training and conceived the Autism Shield Program that is also available to firefighters, EMTs and school nurses. He reached out to Florida Investigator Dennis Debbaudt, who authored the book, "Autism, Advocates and Law Enforcement Professionals," to come to New Jersey to help develop the first set of training classes.

POAC brings its combination video and lecture to any department that requests the training and will do it over multiple shifts and multiple days to make sure every officer has an

Check Points

How can you tell if somebody has autism?

Use this checklist of characteristics many individuals with autism present:

- Little or no eye contact
- Acts as though deaf
- Marked physical hyperactivity and/or extreme passivity
- Little or no apparent fear of real dangers
- Unusual responses to sensations, including a high tolerance for pain
- Inappropriate laughing or crying
- Inappropriate attachments to objects
- Aggressive or self-injurious behavior
- May be non-verbal (approximately 50-percent of this population)
- May not respond to "Stop" command
- May repeat what the officer says
- May be poor listeners – may not seem to care what you have to say
- May have passive monotone voices with unusual pronunciations
- May stare at you or present atypical gaze
- Are usually very honest, sometimes too honest or very blunt
- Source: Parents of Autistic Children (POAC)

Walk for Autism

Whether you walk, donate or simply spread the word, you can support Parents of Autistic Children (POAC) by participating in one of these Autism Walk-A-Thons. (Check www.poacwalk.org or the local listing for more information.)

Woodbridge/Town

April 27

Matthew Jago School, Woodbridge

www.woodbridgewalk.org

Morristown/Town

April 28

Lakewood Blueclaws Stadium, Lakewood

www.poacwalk.org

Passaic/Danville

May 5

Christopher Columbus Middle School, Clifton

www.passaicwalk.org

Mercer

May 11

Ewing High School, Ewing

www.mercerwalk.org

Morris

June 2

Gardner Field, Denville

www.morriswalk.org

Somerset/Lakewood

June 9

Bridgewater Raritan Middle School, Bridgewater

www.somersetwalk.org

opportunity to attend. The classes are approximately two hours, though Weitzen says, "there have been several times when the officers have stayed after to ask questions and that lasts longer than the training."

Response Scenarios

Police Officers have been through enough training sessions to know that the best ones offer solutions rather than just raising problems. Weitzen offers solutions by way of presenting nuggets of knowledge that register and retain. His style combines a bit of Jon Stewart and Tony Robbins, with a hint of Tony Dungy. And he won't hesitate to shock you.

In the midst of telling officers that if they have to cuff or restrain an individual with autism to never step from behind, he will drop this bomb: "They might start crying and telling you they are sorry and your own humanity will come out. You will want to console them or even give them a hug. Under no circumstances should you do that. You will get that backward head thrust that every teacher or parent has been hit with. And then you have somebody who is running loose and handcuffed in the middle of traffic."

The training offers clues about how to recognize an individual with autism (see box page 29). Some of the more mesmerizing nuggets that come forth in the training include:

- How to use your body without touching an individual with autism: Very often, individuals don't like to be touched. They pull away even from a hand on a shoulder.



- Understanding that these individuals can be very literal: If you ask where they live, they might not be able to answer. If you ask their address, they will give you a street and number. You will learn to use short, simple sentences like "go sit in the car," to facilitate understanding. You will learn to wait three seconds to allow time to process the request before repeating.

- Learning that certain times of the year are more likely to produce calls to officers: When kids are on break from school in December or home for the summer, this can lead to residential situations parents can't handle. Individuals with autism thrive on routine; changes in routine can cause behaviors to erupt.

There are many more points of emphasis. Weitzen uses an interactive approach to make a point about individuals with autism being targets for sexual predators, but the specifics of handling this are better left to the training classroom. He also reviews the benefits of getting all families of individuals with autism in the community into the department's 9-1-1 database and about cards individuals can carry that identify them as having autism.

"I didn't know about that card and I have been an officer for 23 years," Loyer said. "Having gone through the training, I think it would be a disservice to the officers and a disservice to the community to not have the training. You take a two-hour class and you walk away with a world of knowledge." ■

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