



Cumming Police Department Launches New Program to Help Keep Individuals with Autism Safe

Community Autism Program (CAP) Allows Individuals to Register with PD and Receive Identification Decals and Wrist Bands

CUMMING, GA – The City of Cumming Police Department hopes to be a leader in Georgia when it comes to protecting the safety of individuals with Autism during interactions with law enforcement officers.

The department is launching a new program, the first of its kind in Georgia, simply called the Community Autism Program, or CAP, in which family members of children or adults with Autism can register through the agency and receive decals and wrist bands that will alert officers to the individual with Autism, allowing officers to be better prepared in dealing with individuals with special needs. The department will eventually tie the program into other local community agencies including the Forsyth County Fire Department, Sheriff's Office, EMS, and Forsyth County Schools. The program expands on what is currently available through Georgia's Logan's Law, a database approved in 2021 meant to help first responders handle calls or incidents involving individuals with special needs.

The program will also provide additional training for officers that specifically addresses best practices when interacting with individuals with Autism, and provide officers with "sensory kits" for their vehicles filled with various tools – such as communication boards, dry erase boards and markers, noise-canceling headphones, sunglasses, and fidget spinners - that can be used to better and more safely interact with special needs individuals.

During a recent meeting with various community organizations that work with the local Autism population, Police Chief PJ Girvan said the Cumming Police Department is committed to serving and protecting the entire community, including individuals with Autism and other special needs.

"We will undergo special training to help us better work with our Autistic community members," he said. "We're committed to the safety of all people in our community, including those with Autism, and we're hoping this starts a movement in Georgia."

CAP is designed to equip officers with essential information to help them respond to 911 calls appropriately. More knowledge and training will help the department not to have to resort to use of force, which has been identified as an ongoing problem nationwide. CAP will help bridge the gap between the Cumming Police Department and individuals with special needs and their loved ones.

Chief Girvan said that properly working with special needs children and adults is a cause very near and dear to the Cumming Police Department, as one of their officers, Sgt. Tyler Burns, has a son, Liam, with Autism who is nonverbal. Sgt. Burns also addressed the group during the community presentation.

"Liam looks just like any other kid so no one can tell he has special needs just by looking at him," Burns said. "There are times when we are out in public and Liam does something that other people don't understand and they think he is misbehaving when really he just doesn't understand. I worry that someday that will cause problems for him."

Sgt. Burns will be receiving special training from Blue Bridge: Autism Training for First Responders, an organization that was started by a police sergeant in New Jersey whose son has Autism. After his training from Blue Bridge, Sgt. Burns will relay the information and training to his co-workers. Additionally, the Cumming PD is partnering with several local Autism organizations to provide even more training to officers.

“We’re working closely with organizations like Behavior Link and Creative Enterprises to give us information about these individuals and the best ways to interact with them,” said Chief Girvan.

When CAP is fully rolled out to the public within the next few weeks, community members will be able to register their child or other family member with Autism with the Cumming Police Department. The registration form will include basic information such as the individual’s name, date of birth, physical description, and emergency contacts, as well as more specific information such as medical conditions, allergies, what escalation looks like for that individual, best ways to approach the individual, their favorite items (such as toys, characters, movies, etc.) and dislikes (things they fear, are sensitive to, etc.), and their preferred communication style (speaking, nonspeaking, sign language, visuals, etc.). This information will be placed in the department’s computer system. After registering, families can receive decals for their homes and vehicles, as well as wrist bands for the individual with Autism to wear, all of which will help make officers aware that they need to use additional caution or other specific methods of communications when encountering that individual. They can also use their “sensory kits” for special tools to make interactions as stress-free as possible.

The Cumming Police Department will have more information about the program available during its upcoming “Summer in the City Concert” on Sept. 6th from 7-10 p.m. at the Cumming City Center’s Lou Sobh Amphitheater. This event raises funds for Creative Enterprises-Forsyth.

“We hope the public will come and support Creative Enterprises and learn more about our new Autism awareness program,” Chief Girvan said. “We’re very excited to be a leader in Georgia when it comes to bettering relationships between law enforcement and special needs populations.”

Below, the Community Autism Program decal and Sgt. Tyler Burns with the decal.

