It’s no secret that working as a public safety telecommunicator can be a tough job. For Spokane Regional Emergency Communications (SREC) telecommunicator Raegan Hays, that job can be even tougher as the single parent of two children on the autism spectrum. That’s why working to support other parents of children on the spectrum, as well as first responders in Spokane County, is so important to her. Hays has been with SREC for nearly 10 years, and in that time she has turned her passion for her kids into a true benefit for the community — and for her communications center.

In addition to being a parent and a telecommunicator, Hays is also a communications training officer (CTO) for SREC. In that role she educates new employees on how to manage emergency calls for those with intellectual or developmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder. Autism disabilities can present very differently from person to person with three levels of recognized impact. Hays’ children are no exception. While her older son has Level 2 — or moderate autism — her younger daughter has Level 3 autism and is severely impaired. For her son, this means some intellectual disabilities, but his primary struggle is with communicating and socialization. He knows he has autism and is aware of his differences. Like many on

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This briefing summarizes information from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), established in 1984 with a mission to help find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation and prevent child victimization. NCMEC has free resources and training to support caregivers, first responders and search teams and to mitigate missing incidents for children on the autism spectrum.

**Autism Facts:**
- In 2018, 1 in 44 children aged 8 were estimated by the CDC to have autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
- In 2021, 286 children on the autism spectrum were reported missing to NCMEC.
- Half of children with ASD wander/elope.
- Wandering occurs across all settings, by people with ASD of all ages, under every type of adult supervision.
- More than one-third of children with ASD cannot communicate their name, address or phone number.
- Risks increase with autism severity: drowning, exposure, dehydration, hypothermia, traffic injuries, falls, physical restraint, encounters with strangers, encounters with law enforcement.
- Individuals on the autism spectrum may have a co-occurring disability such as epilepsy, ADHD, sleep disorders, depression, anxiety disorders and schizophrenia.

**NCMEC DATA (2011-2020)**
The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children’s 10-year analysis of children on the autism spectrum reported missing to the Center showed that of accidental deaths, 84% were drownings.

A child on the autism spectrum may:
- Have a diminished sense of fear or engage in high-risk behavior, such as seeking water or active roadways.
- Seek small or tightly enclosed spaces concealing themselves from search teams.
- Be unable to respond to law enforcement because of their communication style.
- Be at a higher risk for exploitation because of their disability.

Communication and sensory processing may be characterized by:
- Verbal, non-verbal/non-speaking, minimally verbal.
- May use alternative modes of communication.
- May only cite scripts or use echolalia.
- May only understand direct language.
- May require additional processing time.
- Sensory overload (causes bolting).
- Hypo- or hyper-sensitivity to sound, light, touch.

**BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS**
Self-stimulatory behavior, also known as “stimming” and self-stimulation, is the repetition of physical movements, sounds or repetitive movement of objects common in individuals with developmental disabilities but most prevalent in people with autistic spectrum disorder. Such behavior can result in:
- Obsessive tendencies or interests, or rigidity.
- Impulsive actions.
- Repetitive behaviors that provide sensory stimulation (stimming).
- Anxiety can increase stimming.
- Challenging behavior could be caused by inability to communicate, pain, anxiety, defense mechanism.

NCMEC offers a variety of free resources for both first responders and caregivers. These include “Tips for Caregivers” (www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/supporting-children-on-the-autism-spectrum-tips-caregivers.pdf), such as a 9-1-1 script, which provides guidance for families and caregivers on how to effectively communicate with emergency professionals in
the event of an emergency involving their child. This is a proactive measure to help be prepared in the event a child goes missing. NCMEC also has published “Search Protocols and Checklists for First Responders” (www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/children-on-the-autism-spectrum-search-protocols-questionnaire-first-responders.pdf) and “Understanding Children on the Autism Spectrum: A Guide for First Responders” (www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/understanding-children-on-the-autism-spectrum-guide-first-responders.pdf).

In addition, NCMEC provides virtual and in-person training on how to search for and protect children on the autism spectrum. Because of the high drowning rates documented with this population of children, teaching them to swim and immediately searching water are strong recommendations. 9-1-1 professionals are the first line of defense for ensuring swift and safe recoveries of missing children on the autism spectrum. They can provide first responders with critical information based on a few simple questions that can save lives.

SUGGESTED DATA SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


For additional resources, please visit www.missingkids.org/theissues/autism and connect.missingkids.org.

Source: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
know there are resources to help you, and that when you’re having an emergency, the voice on the other end of the phone understands and is working to get you help.” Hays advises parents in Spokane County to complete a form on the Isaac Foundation website (thesiaacfoundation.configio.com) so that temporary caution notes can be placed on their address. Notes that can help create positive interactions between first responder and the lost person include whether the subject is afraid of responders, sirens or lights, and whether the subject will respond to their own name. It’s also helpful for responders to know if the person will be combative or cooperative, or how they respond to physical contact with strangers (for example they like or do not like hugs). As someone who’s been on the side of first responders and the side of the family during the search for a missing child, Hays feels fortunate that the passions and experience of her personal life can benefit her professional life.

The Isaac Foundation is based and operates in the Spokane County area but does networking and advising across the country. Agencies or counties can contact The Isaac Foundation for advice or support on setting up a similar program in their area.

Information about people on the autism spectrum or with developmental disabilities is critical for telecommunicators and responders. Key information from autismspeaks.org includes:

- Nearly half of those with autism wander or bolt from their environment.
- Nearly 28% of 8 year olds with ASD have self-injurious behaviors.
- Drowning remains a leading cause of death for children with autism and account for approximately 90% of deaths associated with wandering or bolting by those age 14 and younger.
- Comorbidity is often seen in people impacted with autism spectrum disorder including epilepsy, ADHD, sleep disorders, depression, anxiety disorders and schizophrenia.

Kelly Conley is Communication & Media Manager, Spokane (Washington) Regional Emergency Communications.

### CDE EXAM #65175

1. Many people on the autism spectrum experience sensory issues?
   a. True
   b. False

2. For those on the autism spectrum, how many recognized levels of impact are there?
   a. 2
   b. 3
   c. 4
   d. 5

3. Was Hays’ daughter aware that she was lost when the police found her in the vacant lot?
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. What is the leading cause of death for children with autism spectrum disorder?
   a. Self-injury
   b. Seizures
   c. Drowning
   d. Traffic injuries

5. What percentage of children with autism spectrum disorder wander?
   a. 15%
   b. 25%
   c. 75%
   d. 50%

6. More than one-third of children with autism spectrum disorder cannot communicate their name, address or phone number.
   a. True
   b. False

7. What month has the highest reports of missing children on the autism spectrum?
   a. May
   b. June
   c. September
   d. October

8. A child on the autism spectrum may have a diminished sense of fear.
   a. True
   b. False

9. What foundation did Hays find useful for providing services to families with children on the autism spectrum?
   a. Missing Children Foundation
   b. Evan’s Foundation
   c. Spokane Foundation
   d. Isaac Foundation

10. What does “stimming” mean?
    a. Sensory stimulation
    b. Seeking small spaces
    c. An anxiety disorder
    d. An allergy

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