



COMMUNITY POLICING

Monmouth County Partnership Conducts 2nd Annual Forum on Autism, Project Lifesaver and Special Needs Registry

By PIO Cynthia Scott and Undersheriff Ted Freeman, Monmouth County Sheriff's Office



On April 2, 2019, World Autism Day, the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office, Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office and Monmouth County Division of Aging, Disability and Veterans Services hosted its Second Annual Forum on Autism, Project Lifesaver and Special Needs Registry at the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office Public Safety Center Special Operations Center. The purpose of the forum was to bring together Project Lifesaver clients, family members and persons interested in learning about Project Lifesaver to share information and updates on programs for autistic individuals. Approximately 150 people attended the three-hour event.

"Although this annual event is held during National Autism Awareness Month, the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office along with partners in law enforcement are committed to acknowledging this disorder all year, through such useful programs, in an effort to maintain the safety of individuals and spare families a lot of anxiety when locating or responding to a loved one's needs," said Sheriff Shaun Golden, a board member of the Monmouth/Ocean Foundation for children. "Every child on the autism spectrum deserves an opportunity to succeed in life. It is our job to assist them during their journey, to teach them that first responders are here to assist and support them, and, to help bring themselves closer to all that they can accomplish."

"Some of our most passionate Special Needs Registry liaisons are those law enforcement officers who have family members with special needs," said Christopher Grammicioni, Monmouth County prosecutor. "There is no stigma in needing extra help, and these officers, who know that first-hand, are our best ambassadors for why this program is so needed. The Special Needs Registry is successful because our law enforcement partners at the Prosecutor's Office, Sheriff's Office and municipal police departments work in tandem to provide the added support and attention that

our special needs residents need."

Lori Linskey, 1st Assistant Monmouth County prosecutor, opened the program with a discussion about the Special Needs Registry, a partnership between the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office, Monmouth County Sheriff's Office and the Monmouth County Police Chiefs Association. She explained that the program is free and is available to any person who lives, works or attends school in Monmouth County and has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. The registry was created to help emergency responders assist residents with special needs in emergent situations. The Special Needs Registry provides vital information about the individual's special needs, emergency contacts, a physical description and current photograph.

"Having the parent of a special needs child tell me that our Special Needs Registry gives them 'piece of mind' is the best incentive to continue to do all that we can to get as many people registered who can benefit from our program. We hope that those who register never need to dial 911, but we take great pride in knowing that our collective efforts to create this program will make that process easier in times of emergency," said Linskey.

Monmouth County Sheriff's Office Autism Awareness Coordinator Fran Hines addressed the forum on the value of Project Lifesaver for individuals on the autism spectrum who may tend to wander. Mr. Hines reviewed the procedure for enrolling autistic individuals in the Project Lifesaver program. Colleen Smith, LCSW, Caregiver Support, Monmouth County Office on Aging, talked about senior clients with memory disorders who tend to wander and reviewed the procedure for seniors to enroll in the program. Sheriff's Officers Joyce Schmidt and Patrick Luke explained the Project Lifesaver initial hookup procedures for the program, battery changes and response protocols.

Public Safety Telecommunicator Allison Welker explained how to call in a missing person when someone on the Project Lifesaver program wanders off. Detective Todd Smith, Freehold Township Police Department, father of an autistic child, shared some of his experiences in raising an autistic child from both perspectives as a police officer and as a parent of an autistic child.

PIO Cynthia Scott and Autism Coordinator Fran Hines showed segments of the new video-based "Bee Safe" Program, a program that teaches autistic individuals how to interact with police and other first responders in an emergency. Autistic individuals respond in different ways to sirens, personnel in uniform and to stressful situations to which first responders may be summoned.

"The Special Needs Forum provided an opportunity to have first responders, program administrators, provider agencies and family members all in the same room sharing personal stories and information about program updates and services," said Sue Moleon, executive director of the Monmouth County Office on Aging, Disabilities and Veterans Services. "The break-out sessions included in this Forum offered participants a unique opportunity to witness in real time how technology is used to find a missing person and underscored the importance of supporting the use of these technological advancements."

A panel discussion, moderated by Monmouth County Sheriff's Office Public Information Officer Cynthia Scott, included Linskey, Detective Todd Smith, Autism Coordinator Fran Hines, PST Allison Welker, and Colleen Smith, LCSW.

A variety of participation options were available to the forum participants including demonstrations of bloodhound tracking, Project Lifesaver tracking and equipment, drone demonstration, static displays and tours of the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office Communication Center at which Project Lifesaver and Special Needs Registry calls are received. ●