

Disability Safety Top Ten Tips for Virginia Residents

Individuals with an autism spectrum disorder or other cognitive disability could potentially face any number of emergency situations in which they will come in contact with police, EMTs, firefighters, or other first responder personnel. Many of them have not had any training in the signs, symptoms and special handling of these individuals. As such, parents need to proactively prepare for emergencies that could cause injury or even death of your loved one. These top ten things can better allow you to reduce the likelihood or impact of an emergency.

1. **DISCLOSE, DISCLOSE, DISCLOSE!!!** Get your neighbors and community involved proactively. Have a get-to-know-your-kid barbecue or party with your neighbors, so they know you are approachable. Give them your phone number, so they can call you before calling 911, if they have a potential concern. Show them your child's identification information bracelet, necklace, or info cards. Display autism awareness and notification safety items (sources at end of article). Get Virginia "Unlocking Autism" license plates. Inform neighborhood watch programs. Visit your local police and fire departments.

2. Provide 911 information sheets with photo and your contact info to neighbors and your local 911 database dispatch center or police station (format sources and examples at end of article). A 911 flag with key dispatch data alerts first responders that your home is a "location of interest". Information sheets must include full name, address, phone numbers and emergency contact persons. In Fairfax County, this can be done online at their pre-notification 9-1-1 program at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/911/emergency-health-profile>. For other counties, the recommended 9-1-1 flag sheet handout format can be found at <http://poac-nova.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Debbaudt-911-Flag-Sheet-Handout.doc>. Other information could include:

- Current photograph and physical description including height, weight, eye and hair color, any scars or other ID marks.
- Sensory, medical, or dietary issues, if any.
- Inclination for elopement and any atypical behaviors or characteristics that may attract attention.
- Possible compulsive activity.
- Favorite attractions and locations where person may be found.
- Likes, dislikes--approach and de-escalation techniques.
- Method of communication, if non-verbal- iPad, sign language, or picture boards.
- Identification wear- bracelet, necklace, info cards, or in their clothes.
- Map and address guide to nearby properties with water sources and dangerous locations highlighted.
- Blueprint or drawing of home, with bedroom of individual highlighted.

3. Complete a missing child packet through your local police or sheriff's department. These packets could include a data report, photo, fingerprints, and possibly DNA swab for you to take home.

4. If your loved one elopes or tends to run off, enroll them the Project Lifesaver program with your local police or sheriff's department. It uses on proven radio technology and a specially-trained search and rescue team. They will wear a personalized wristband that always emits a radio tracking signal. When caregivers notify the local Project Lifesaver agency that the person is missing, a search and rescue team responds to the wanderer's area and starts searching with the mobile locator tracking system. More information is at <http://www.projectlifesaver.org>. Search times have been reduced from hours and days to minutes. Since April 1999, they have nationally had a 99.99% success rate for over 3,750 individuals with an average location time of less than 30 minutes. Other measures may have to be taken, such as Plexiglass or bars on windows, mechanical locks or audible alarms on windows and doors, or video monitors. Also, it helps to dress the person in bright colored shirts and coats for a quicker, positive search results.

5. If Project Lifesaver is not available or preferred, a number of GPS tracking and locator systems are also available (sources at end of article). Of note, information on a FREE Safelink Wireless cell phone with very limited service is at <https://www.safelinkwireless.com/Enrollment/Safelink/en/Public/NewHome.html>. Put "In Case of Emergency" (ICE) emergency contact information into your child's cell phone, iPad, and tablet. More info is at <http://icecontact.com> or <http://www.ice4autism.com>.

6. Since drowning is the leading cause of death for individuals with autism, teach your child to swim or at least float. Adapted swim programs in your area may be able to help.
7. If your child elopes or tends to run off in parking lots, apply for a “handicapped” blue, hanging parking placard. The disabilities application from the Virginia DMV is at https://www.dmv.virginia.gov/drivers/#disability/plates_assist.html. If appropriate, get a “Walker” or “Non-Driving” identification cards from Virginia DMV at https://www.dmv.virginia.gov/drivers/#id/get_id.html. Even if they do not drive, they should have a photo ID. If you get a driver’s license or ID card from the Virginia DMV, you can ask that an identification code for “Autism” or an “Intellectual Disability” be added to the license or ID card to specifically identify the individual as having that disability.
8. Highly recommend that you check your zip code on the local sex offender registry. The Virginia State Police Sex Offender and Crimes Against Minors Registry is at <http://sex-offender.vsp.virginia.gov/sor>.
9. Invite your school resource or safety officer to an IEP meeting, if necessary. It can be very important to involve the safety officer from your child’s school. This is particularly true if your child has a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) or if you have provided specific restriction instructions about restraint and seclusion.
10. If behaviors in the home become a problem, contact your local county Community Services Board to see if they have an emergency behavioral or mental health assistance capability for your individual with an intellectual and/or developmental disability, before you call 911 for police intervention. Virginia’s Regional Educational Assessment Crisis Response and Habilitation (REACH) Program provides emergency family crisis services and behavioral assistance for individuals of any age in Northern Virginia by calling Easterseals UCP at 855-897-8278 anytime. Also, the Fairfax County Mobile Crisis Unit can be reached at 703-573-5679 from 8am to midnight. If arrest occurs, use the Arc’s “Developing Positive Interactions for People with Developmental Disabilities and First Responders, Police, and the Justice System: A Guide for People with Developmental Disabilities and their Loved Ones” at <https://thearcofnova.org/content/uploads/sites/6/2018/08/Justice-System-Guide-for-Families-November-2020.pdf>. A “When Individuals with Developmental Disabilities Become Involved in the Criminal Justice System: A Guide for Attorneys” is at <https://thearcofnova.org/content/uploads/sites/6/2018/08/Justice-System-Guide-for-Attorneys-November-2020.pdf>. They have a three-minute “The Justice System for People with DD” webinar video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNuu3J90KvE&feature=youtu.be>.

More disability and safety resources are at the Autism Spectrum Disorders and Public Safety Considerations References and Websites from the Autism Society of Northern Virginia at <http://www.asnv.org/education>, or from POAC-NoVA at <http://poac-nova.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/PSWG-ASD-Safety-Training-for-Families-Websites2.5.doc>.

“Section A: Recommended autism safety references web sites for families” - information articles on many safety topics.

“Section B: Recommended autism safety web sites for families in Virginia” - information specifically for families in Virginia.

“Section C: Recommended web sites for autism awareness and safety items for families” - assortment of companies and organizations selling autism awareness bracelets, necklaces, lanyards, shoe tags, stickers, magnets, decals, labels, seat belt harnesses, ID cards, forms & cards, USB devices, clothing, signs, tags, pins, and bumper stickers.

“Section D: Recommended web sites for tracking and locator systems for families” - wide variety of tracking and locator system options are available using GPS devices in cell phones, jackets, shoes, and others.

If you have any questions at all about any safety issues, please CALL Scott Campbell at 703 969-6730 anytime. He really does mean ANY TIME!