
Ensuring Safe Outcomes: How Individuals with Disabilities and Stakeholders Can Work Together

A Joint Presentation with Disability Rights Arizona (DRAZ)
and The Chandler Police Department



Agenda

- Introductions
- Discuss systemic issues. The history and progress that has been made.
- City of Chandler Initiatives
- Crisis intervention teams
- Moving forward
- Q&A

About Your Presenters

Sey In - Sey is the interim managing attorney for healthcare at Disability Rights Arizona (DRAZ). Sey has worked at DRAZ since 2018 on various issues impacting Arizonans with disabilities, including supported decision-making, access to auxiliary aids and services for clients with hearing disabilities, fair housing matters, employment matters, and voting rights. He received his undergraduate degrees from Arizona State University and law degree from Hofstra University where he was the recipient of the Honorable David A Patterson Award for Public Service and received a certificate in clinical bioethics.



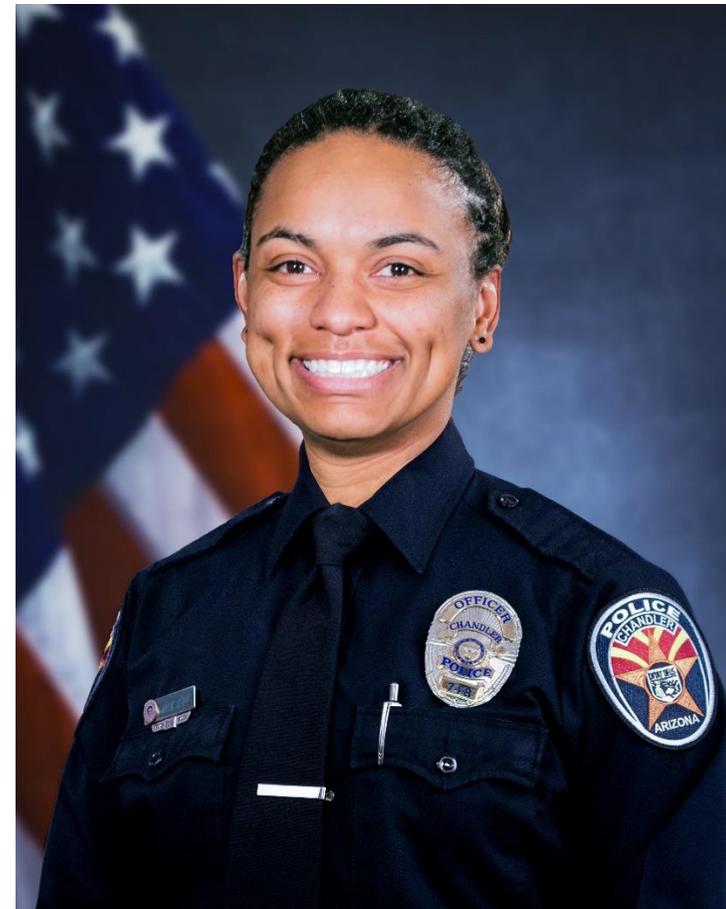
Nancy Martinez

Nancy Martinez is actively involved in advancing public awareness and understanding of intellectual and developmental disabilities within her community. As the Community Engagement Coordinator for Chandler Police, she collaborates with first responders and individuals with I/DD to deliver disability awareness training to law enforcement agencies across Arizona, with her curriculum endorsed by the Autism Society of Phoenix and the Autism Society of Southern Arizona. Her work centers on building trust, improving public safety response, and strengthening systems that support vulnerable populations. Nancy is a native Arizonan, an Arizona State University graduate, and the proud mother of a son with special needs.



Nicole Upshaw

Nicole Upshaw is a nine-year police officer with the Chandler Police Department and a founding member of the department's Behavioral Health Unit which responds to mental health related calls with a focus on de-escalation, maintaining dignity, and connecting individuals to appropriate treatment services. A Grand Canyon University graduate with degrees in Justice Studies and Psychology, she advocates for prioritizing education in crisis recognition and communication strategies within police tactics to better serve people with disabilities and those experiencing behavioral health challenges. She is an Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training (AZPOST) Use of Force Instructor who integrates crisis intervention principles into defensive tactics training to promote safer outcomes for community members in crisis. She also serves as a Field Training Officer, is a former Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Crisis Negotiator, and is a Rape and Aggression Defense (RAD) Instructor for civilians.



Where we were, and where we're going

Some Background

- Systemic concerns involving individuals with IDD and police interactions have led to calls for reforms
- Often times, 911 calls will be made concerning an individual experiencing a mental health or behavioral health crisis, or behaviors
- 12 states have mandatory training requirements
- Advocates, self-advocates, and disability rights organizations urge better training, reform. Many create training programs themselves.
- Individuals and police have one goal in common – to promote safe interactions

Highlighting a recent story

- Victor Perez -
 - Nonverbal 17-year-old with CP, autism, and experiencing a mental health crisis
 - Shot and killed, holding a knife, from the other side of the fence
 - Family did not see him as a threat
 - “[E]xperts say that some autistic behaviors — such as involuntary movements or not responding to commands — could be misinterpreted by police as suspicious or dangerous”
 - The PD policy manual does not address people with autism

From Self Advocates Perspectives

“We all have the five senses, but autistic people dial it up times 10. That’s what it feels like to have autism.” – From a self-advocate

“I interpret things in ways people can’t predict.” – From a self-advocate

“Approach every situation knowing what the person’s needs are, how you’re going to approach it and how to resolve the encounter peacefully [de-escalate]” – From a parent

“[Some individuals] have an aversion to loud noises.” – From a parent

“His receptive communication is very, very weak.” – From a parent

The Autism Project, Autistic Self-Advocate & Family Insights for First Responders

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwAgezZBzyw>

IBCESS Report

- Individuals with IDD face a significantly higher risk of encountering misunderstandings with law enforcement
- Individuals may
 - experience difficulties in understanding the situation
 - find police interactions distressing and overwhelming
 - avoid eye contact with police officers, which may be misinterpreted
 - engage in stimming or fidgeting, which may be misinterpreted
- Police may perceive behaviors as suspicious and may escalate
- Source: <https://ibcces.org/blog/2020/06/22/law-enforcement-autism-why-important/>

Building Trust and Safety: Police Partnerships with Individuals with I/DD

Nancy Martinez, Chandler Police Department



Strengthening Our Partnerships

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- Trust is built before a call for service
- No single initiative stands alone



Internal I/DD Training

- Co-developed with community partners
- Uses local body-worn footage
- Highlights successful calls for service
- Peer-based discussion and analysis



Targeted Community Outreach

Events such as “Pizza With Police” help to:

- Increase familiarity between individuals and officers
- Support positive, low-stress interactions
- Build relationships over time



Supporting Safe Interactions

BE SAFE Interactive Events

- Builds familiarity on both sides
- Reduces anxiety during real encounters



Voluntary Registry, e.g., "Return Me Safe"

- Opt-in
- Confidential
- Family driven
- Helps responders arrive informed

A More Informed Approach for Mental Health Calls for Service

Officer Nicole Upshaw, Chandler Police Department



Department Philosophy Towards Mental Health Calls for Service Matters

Analysis

Growing number of California sheriffs no longer respond to mental health calls

FEBRUARY 24, 2025

[Ninth Circuit Ruling Prompts Refusal to Respond to Mental Health Calls](#)

Fearing lawsuits, El Cajon Police stopped responding to some mental health calls

"We wear the badge, we carry the gun," Cooper said at his press conference announcing the new policy. "We deal with crime, not mental health crises."



Crisis Intervention Training (CIT)

- Crisis recognition
- Active listening skills
- Voluntary mental health resources
- Involuntary mental health resources
- Speakers with lived experience
- Practical Scenarios



Moving Forward

Legal Framework

- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- No qualified individual shall, because of their disability, be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination in the services, programs, and activities of all state and local government entities.
- Programs and activities may include interviewing witnesses or parties, conducting arraignment, taking testimony, providing notices of rights, police responding to complaints, vehicle stops and searches, arrests

Legal Framework

Make reasonable modifications in policies, practices, or procedures when necessary to avoid disability discrimination in all interactions, unless doing so results in a fundamental alteration.

Some examples of how law enforcement have implemented the ADA.

- Trained law enforcement officers
- Require officials to explore reasonable modifications
- Take appropriate steps to ensure effective communication

Source: [DOJ Examples and Resources for ADA Compliance](#)

Reasonable accommodations

- Augmentative communication devices
- Request for first responders to speak slower
- Limit sensory distractions
- Involve support systems, caregivers
- Ask for additional time to process information
- Consider police registry (if available)

The De-Escalation Training Act of 2022

- Directs the DOJ to develop or identify effective existing training for law enforcement officers and covered mental health professionals regarding
 - De-escalation tactics
 - Safely responding to an individual experiencing a mental or behavioral health crisis
 - Successfully participating in a crisis intervention team
 - Making referrals to community-based mental and behavioral health services

The Blue Envelope Program – A.R.S. § 28-459

- Designed to ensure safe traffic stops interactions between law enforcement and autistic drivers
- Drivers can keep their Blue Envelopes in the glove compartment, or other easily accessible location
- Drivers can contact Amanda Aburzzo (aabruzzo@azdot.gov) with ADOT MVD to request a Blue Envelope or at distributors <https://azdot.gov/mvd/driver-services/blue-envelope-program-for-autistic-drivers/blue-envelope-distributors>

New Ways to Improve Communication During Traffic Stops



Explore 3 New Tools Designed To Support Understanding And Safety During Traffic Stops

VEHICLE RECORD INDICATOR



Sign in to your AZMVD Now Account. Under "Other Services" select "Programs," then Communication Accommodations. Select **Add Vehicle Indicator**. This lets officers know you or a passenger may need extra time, clear speech, or other communication support during a traffic stop.

CUSTOMER RECORD INDICATOR



From your AZMVD Now Account, select **Add Individual Indicator**. When an officer queries an ID card or driver license record, the communication accommodation need will be displayed - no matter what vehicle you're driving.

THE BLUE ENVELOPE PROGRAM



Blue Envelopes are available through Chandler PD, other police agencies, or any AZMVD ADOT office statewide. The Blue Envelope is a physical tool for drivers to help communicate with officers. Keep your license, registration, and emergency contact information inside the Blue Envelope and present it during a traffic stop.

City of Phoenix

- Smart Notifications – a system for first responders
- Allows Phoenix residents to provide additional information to officers when responding to incidents at their residence
- Apply to request reasonable accommodations
- This information will be confidential and only City of Phoenix PD will have access to it
- <https://www.phoenix.gov/administration/departments/police/public-safety-services/smart-notifications.html>

Cities with registries

- City of Maricopa – Special Needs Registry
- Tempe – T.E.A.M. Reunite
- Gilbert: Bring Me Home program
- Goodyear: Vulnerable person database registration program
- In development
 - Avondale
 - Scottsdale
 - Mesa

Tips for Self Advocates and Loved Ones

- Utilize the Blue Envelope Program
- Roleplay police interactions
- Understand your disability and explore different accommodations
- Work with your local police department, see if there are training opportunities available
- Have your ID handy
- Know your rights
- Consider creating a disclosure tool

Legislative Advocacy

- Engage with your local leaders, mayor, city council, police department, fire department, etc.
- Engage with State Senators and Representatives
- Join self-advocates at Disability Day at the Capitol
 - Wednesday, February 18, 2026
 - <https://form.jotform.com/AZSILC/azdac-day-at-the-capitol-2026>
- Join social media pages to learn about upcoming events

Does your city...

- Have a training program for officers on IDD, with a focus on de-escalation?
- Have a voluntary registry (for reasonable accommodations)?
- Have opportunities for police and the IDD communities to interact and get to know each other?

Resources

- AZ Department of Economic Security
https://des.az.gov/sites/default/files/media/Police_%28Mis%29Understanding_Resources_to_Support_Interactions_with_First_Responders_Presentation.pdf
- Autism Speaks <https://www.autismspeaks.org/interacting-law-enforcement>
- Organization for Autism Research <https://researchautism.org/oaracle-newsletter/autism-and-law-enforcement-strategies-for-safer-interactions/>
- Pathfinders for Autism
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/parent-tips-how-to-interact-with-police/>

Resources

- Autism Society of Greater Phoenix - <https://phxautism.org/resources/safety/>
- Autism Society of Southern Arizona - <https://as-az.org/>

Contact Us

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