

Emergency responders get help on helping the autistic

By Eric Lebowitz

Police, firefighters, and paramedics are typically the best-trained and most comfortable people in the community to deal with perilous and life-threatening situations. But sometimes, even the experts need some guidance.

Dozens of emergency personnel from all over the county came together at the Greenburgh Public Library on Tuesday, March 27, for a conference titled “First Responders and Individuals with Autism: Averting Crises and Preventing Disastrous Consequences.”

The conference, which started at 9 a.m. and ran into the early afternoon, was broken into several sections, starting with expert presentations and including law enforcement videos, testimony from parents of autistic children, open discussion, and a question-and-answer segment.

Ardsley resident Robert Bernstein, an autism educational specialist with a practice in Dobbs Ferry, was one of the conference organizers. Bernstein shared his experiences with autistic children during the opening portion of the conference program, which featured four speakers. He began by thanking Greenburgh Town Supervisor Paul Feiner for his help in putting the symposium together.

“He was invaluable,” Bernstein said.

The primary purpose of the event was to educate emergency workers about the best way to deal with people — particularly children — on the autism spectrum during a crisis. Bernstein showed clips of interactions he’s had during sessions with clients to illustrate examples of the different ways autism can manifest itself. He made the point that the challenges children on the spectrum face can vary greatly, but did offer some general suggestions.

One video Bernstein showed was a young girl fixated on her stuffed alligator. She constantly groomed and fiddled with the toy animal, ignoring anything else happening in the room. Bernstein said these objects could be key in an emergency, because separation from them could cause the child to distress and add difficulty to an already hazardous situation.

“If you need to remove someone from a house, help the child bring the object with



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Robert Bernstein talks to conference participants at the Greenburgh Public Library.

them,” Bernstein said. “That could make all the difference in the world.”

One of the noteworthy facts Bernstein presented was that the developmentally disabled are seven times more likely to encounter law enforcement than the general population. He gave several examples of children who lost emotional control because of seemingly harmless circumstances — like a

parent refusing to take the child for ice cream — that escalated to a confrontation requiring police intervention. One mother in a video clip Bernstein showed said she relies on the police to help calm her daughter down during fits of rage that can turn violent despite the child’s generally benevolent nature.

“It’s not only about the child, it’s about the family,” Bernstein explained.

Maris Krasnow, who holds a doctorate in education and works as a clinical associate professor at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University, also gave a presentation during the conference’s first segment. Krasnow touched on many of the same points as Bernstein and reminded police officers how important it is to stay calm and non-threatening to autistic children in dangerous situations, noting that even parents can get frustrated with their children at times.

“Having a child like this is no picnic,” she said.

Ossining Police Lt. Dan Slater, who is also a trainer at the Westchester Police Academy, spoke after Bernstein and Krasnow. Slater’s expertise is not clinical or academic, but experiential, as his 19-year-old son was diagnosed autistic at age 7. Slater said that before the diagnosis, he associated autism with the Dustin Hoffman character in the movie “Rain Man,” and got most of his information from television.

“Thirteen years ago, I was as ignorant about autism as anyone else,” he said.

Slater said one of his concerns is that autistic children often have difficulty communicating — some cannot speak meaningfully at all — which could come across as disrespectful to police. Slater said he tries to educate new police officers about developmental disabilities so they can distinguish an autistic person from someone simply refusing to cooperate.

“We don’t like wise guys,” he said, adding that he has also endeavored to teach his son about how to talk respectfully to authority figures.

As the morning wore on, emergency workers in the audience seemed engaged and participated actively in the presentations by answering questions posed by the speakers. There were even moments of levity, as some of the videos showed Bernstein’s clients making witty, insightful remarks about the world around them.

All in all, however, the focus of the conference was not a laughing matter. It was, as the title suggested, about averting disaster, and that is what emergency workers do best.