A new communications tool for Ohio’s police, disabled community

Database will alert officers of individuals whose communication is impaired

by Ohio Rep. Scott Wiggam

In public service, one has the opportunity to meet individuals with incredibly moving stories. Shortly after I was elected to serve my home county of Wayne (located in northeast Ohio) in the House of Representatives, a local mother called my office to share her passionate concern with me. Her son was diagnosed with autism at an early age, and was preparing to graduate from high school. Now, just as any parent, this mother became anxious due to her son recently receiving his driver’s license. I personally remember the pit in my stomach when my children pulled out of our driveway as they sat behind the wheel.

My wife and I, however, did not have this mom’s additional worries. She was concerned that if her son were to be pulled over by a police officer, he may be overstimulated by the lights, sirens and stress when approached by the officer.

Social and sensory overstimulation is a common characteristic for individuals with autism, and her son had communication barriers as well. This loving mother wanted to make sure she or her son had a way of notifying an officer — before he or she approached the vehicle. With such notification, the situation could be handled appropriately, and conflicts could be avoided.

As she shared her heartfelt concerns, I began to envision a bill that, ultimately, was on the minds of several other representatives.

‘Help de-escalate police encounters’

After a conversation with Rep. Theresa Gavarone, we drafted a bill and introduced it as HB 115 in 2017. It was signed into law this summer.

As a result, we are helping remove the barriers between law enforcement and individuals with communication disabilities by creating a voluntary, state-run initiative for individuals to provide this information to law enforcement.

This information is then entered into a database. Officers are immediately notified of the presence of an individual whose communication is impaired. By simply taking a one-page form to the doctor, an individual who meets the inclusive definition of a communication disability may volunteer to provide this information to law enforcement.

For example, veterans and others suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder may volunteer to notify law enforcement of this potential hindrance.

In the past, the absence of such a voluntary registration system in Ohio has harmed individuals, while not providing our law enforcement officers with a vital tool for interacting with the community. Ohioans from all over the state visited my office as I helped draft the legislation.

They shared personal stories of being unable to communicate with officers, and how this escalates their encounters with police. We’ve also heard about high-profile incidents in other states.

Recently, a deaf man in Oklahoma City was killed by police when he did not respond to an officer’s verbal orders. The neighbors of this individual frantically attempted to inform the officers that the man could not hear them, but the lack of information available to the officers potentially led to this altercation escalating into a fatal shooting.

Additionally, a 14-year-old autistic child in Arizona was tackled by police in a park and arrested when he was exhibiting characteristics of an individual under the influence of drugs.

This child was playing with a piece of string. When asked what he was doing, the 14-year-old told the officer that he was “stimming.” This term is used to describe the actions of an individual with autism, such as rocking in place or repeatedly flapping one’s hands. The officer did not know what the child meant, assumed he was on drugs, and tackled him to the ground.

Bill received bipartisan support

HB 115 enjoyed bipartisan support as it made its way through the Ohio General Assembly and to Gov. John Kasich for his signing.

This bill transcended the party politics that is all too common in Columbus and Washington, D.C.

Summary of recently signed HB 115

- Allow individuals (or their parents or guardians) to voluntarily register as being diagnosed with a communication disability or a disability that can impair communication
- Develop a verification form for these individuals that includes certification by a health care professional about the communication disability
- Include in the verification form (for use in the database; see below) the individual’s driver’s license or state identification card number, as well as any relevant license plate numbers
- Require Ohio’s Department of Public Safety to create a database of individuals who voluntarily registered (information in the database is not a public record)
- Make this database available to state and local police via the Law Enforcement Automated Data System

I am very proud of our General Assembly for the passage of House Bill 115.

We not only addressed the concerns of a mother in my home county, but showed how states across the nation can create a seamless process for improving communication between law enforcement and some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Rep. Scott Wiggam, a Republican, was first elected to the Ohio House in November 2016.

Submissions welcome

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