

Testimony to the Task Force on the Police Transparency and Accountability Bill

September 16, 2020

My name is Adrienne Benjamin, and I want to thank the task force for this opportunity to testify. I live in New Britain with my husband and Zoe, our 24 yr old daughter who has severe autism and intellectual disability. Basically, she's a lot like a two yr old, sometimes delightful and other times having full blown temper outbursts.

I want to share our story of a successful police response to an autistic crisis.

Last April, one month into the Covid lockdown, as my daughter had lost all of her programming, structure and activities, her behaviors were worse and worse. Daily dangerous tantrums. I take her on lots of long car rides, the only favorite activity left for her.

But, there are still tantrums. This tantrum was so dangerous that I could no longer safely drive, so, I found a large, mostly empty parking lot to let her out of the car to blow off steam. I try to give her medication, but she kept escalating, screaming, wildly attacking me and most importantly, walking towards the busy street. I'm trying to distract her, divert her, and stop her but couldn't. My panic is rising. Then, I see a young woman walking towards us offering help.

She's an off duty officer with the Rocky Hill Police Department and says she's got experience with autism. She spoke in a calm, quiet voice, asking questions. The two of us could more easily block Zoe's path towards the street. For the first few minutes, Zoe was still wild and dangerous, lunging at both of us. This officer remained calm, had a solid presence, and did not shout, give orders, nor put hands on Zoe. I explained that Zoe was non-verbal and functions at the level of a toddler. After about 10 minutes, she was able to de-escalate this out of control situation, and I'm able to give Zoe her medication. Finally, she's in the car and I click the seat belt and we are safe.

A very happy ending.

I found out later that she had specialized training in working with people who have special needs, like mental illness, and autism. As I understand it, this isn't standard training for all police officers in Connecticut. I think the task force needs to make sure this type of compassionate and de-escalation training becomes the standard for all officers in Connecticut.

Thank you.

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