



SIRENS OF SILENCE: CARE NEEDS NO WORDS

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 44 children (2021) is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

For some children with ASD, lights and sirens become sensory overload and overwhelming. Individuals with ASD are each unique and have a range of challenges, including communication and social skills. Some may be limited in verbal communication or nonverbal which accounts for nearly one-third of people with autism.

Nearly half of those with autism also wander or bolt from safety. Seeing a fully suited first responder or stranger can also provide a sense of uneasiness.

To help familiarize and expose individuals with ASD to first responders, the Los Angeles County Fire Department's (LACoFD) *Sirens of Silence* program will work with local organizations, so children with ASD and their parents/caregivers can meet firefighters and lifeguards and see/touch the equipment and apparatus in a quiet, less stimulating setting.

Sensitivity to location makes the program unlike many others, since firefighters will respond to emergencies on location rather than encounter individuals at the fire station itself.

It is an opportunity for first responders and children with ASD and their parents to learn from one another. Firefighters and lifeguards can learn what to look for, how to help calm individuals in times of emergency, and receive helpful tips and advice (e.g., how to approach, how to deal with sensory challenges, de-escalation strategies, etc.).

Children with ASD and their parents can receive more exposure to first responders which is important to easing comfort levels. It builds familiarity by seeing firefighters and lifeguards with their equipment on/off and getting an opportunity to interact with them. Participants can touch the equipment and apparatus through demonstrations that are more tailored to their needs.

The *Sirens of Silence* program consists of three components: 1) **education and awareness** for the Department's first responders through a mandatory training module as well as access to visual aids and informational materials with advice and practical tips on how to approach, respond, and communicate; 2) **special needs-friendly events** for residents to meet and interact with first responders in a welcoming and sensory-sensitive space; and, 3) **safety-related items** (i.e., seatbelt covers, sensory toys, etc.) for special needs patients.

The Sirens of Silence program was created by the Los Angeles County Fire Department, in collaboration with and vetted by parents, advocates, clinicians/therapists, educators, and physicians who work with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, to bring awareness and foster inclusivity to the growing population with special needs.

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