



Hidden Wings Workshop helps law enforcement deal with disabled

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The trouble started with an autistic 17-year-old boy wanting to visit a neighbor's tiny kitten and walking uninvited into the neighbor's home.

Though he'd been warned not to do so by his father, the boy went into the home anyway. The teenager was unable to understand appropriate social behavior and was unaware that what he was doing was wrong.

The family was contacted by local law enforcement and told that the neighbor was filing trespassing charges against the teen. Reprimanded by the law enforcement officers, the boy was scared, his father recalls.

The Rev. James Billington and his wife, Dr. Julia Billington, have heard far too many stories like that. Having founded Hidden Wings, a nonprofit education and social skills program in Solvang in 2009, the couple have daily interactions with a wide range of people within the autism spectrum.

In an effort to prevent other parents and special needs people from experiencing situations similar to the boy's, or having potentially damaging or frightening interactions with police officers and deputies, the Billingtons are hosting a free interactive workshop May 9 that will focus on the relationship between law enforcement and people with special needs.

The Rev. Billington said the training will be geared specifically toward teens and adults with special needs - including autism, attention deficit disorder, severe anxiety disorder and Tourette's syndrome - to provide scenarios of real-life situations and proper responses that could be applicable to anyone.

Author Emily Iland, past president of the Autism Society of Los Angeles, will be the featured speaker at the workshop, which will be held from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at Stacey Hall at St. Mark's-in-the-Valley Episcopal Church, 2901 Nojoqui Ave. in Los Olivos.

With two of their four sons on the autism spectrum, the Billingtons have helped smooth over a number of potentially volatile situations in the past few years around the county.

Most of the time, they explained, the incidents involved the youth using inappropriate language or behavior toward officers and deputies - actions understandable to those who are familiar with the diagnosis, but not always to officers.

They're hoping the workshop can help.

"Julia and I never would have imagined five years ago, when Hidden Wings incorporated, how many of our students, and those whom we know in similar situations around the country, once they reached adulthood, have misunderstandings leading to bad consequences with the law," said the Rev. Billington, a Santa Ynez resident.

"I don't know why we didn't foresee this, since the reason we started Hidden Wings was the death of a boy who was our son's 'Big Brother' in middle school. He jumped off a bridge when hearing the sirens and seeing the bright lights of an approaching policeman."

The boy, named Ryan, was autistic and afraid of the officers. His story is one used by the Billingtons in their work with Hidden Wings, which helps people with special needs make the transition from high school into the workforce.

"His story haunts us to this day and we just didn't want it to happen again," the Rev. Billington said.

During the workshop, law enforcement officers will be on hand to take part in live, situational reenactments, as well as role-playing, games and activities "which provide an excellent opportunity for officers to interact with members of the community." They'll even go so far as to handcuff those who are interested, so the participants have a sense of what that action feels like in real life.

Sheriff Bill Brown said deputies have attended training on special needs interactions, presented by one of the department's own deputies who has an autistic child.

Avoiding unnecessary issues in such situations, he said, has been a concern of his. "We welcome the opportunity to be a part of this and I look forward to the good it will do for the community," Sheriff Brown said Saturday.

During the workshop, Ms. Iland will screen portions of the film, "Be Safe Movie," which features seven case studies explaining possible encounters people with special needs might face with the law, and how they should respond when approached by officers.

"Run-ins with law enforcement can be especially difficult for those who can't properly, or quickly, answer a police officer's questions," the Rev. Billington said.



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The Rev. Jim Billington and his wife, Dr. Julie Billington, are the forces behind Hidden Wings school in Solvang.

Ms. Iland, an adjunct professor in the Department of Special Education at California State University Northridge, said that in cases such as those of the trespassing boy, telling an officer there are "mitigating circumstances" is critical, as well as explaining that diversion, instead of incarceration, may well be appropriate in the case.

"Conceptually, it's a great idea!"

— Sheriff Bill Brown —

Carpinteria resident Kevin Hosseini, 19, watched the film and gave a testimonial to Ms. Iland. Last year the teen, who attended a transition program for young adults with developmental disabilities in Carpinteria, was served with a restraining order filed by his special education teacher, an aide and a student, according to his mother, Debra.

While in a psychiatric facility, the teen allegedly made threats that were reported to law enforcement, and eventually to the teacher.

Kevin told Ms. Iland that after he watched the movie, he "learned to stay calm, not to run away or argue. Do what the police officer tells you to do. Whether you do something wrong or not, you still need to stay calm and not run away...When a police officer stops me, I need to let him know I have autism."

The Billingtons want the workshop to serve as a springboard for the county-wide implementation of the voluntary Take Me Home program.

Similar to the efforts used to identify seniors with memory impairment, Take Me Home was developed by the Pensacola Police Department as a way to provide law enforcement agencies with photographs, identifying information, contacts and details about special needs, particularly autistic, people in their jurisdictions.

It is used in many jurisdictions nationwide including San Diego; Waco, Texas; Sacramento County; and West Virginia; and is endorsed by the Autism Society of America.

On the voluntary and confidential forms, the diagnosis or disability includes autism, brain injury, full or partial deafness; full or partial blindness; cerebral palsy; and epilepsy.

The forms provide spaces for communication methods, including picture-communication system, sign language, nonverbal, non communicative and speech difficulty.

Special considerations on the forms include things such as noting that the person hugs; repeats phrases; has a tendency to run; is touch-, noise- or light-sensitive; disrobes; or is combative.

The Rev. Billington said the work will be completed by parents and youth, so as not to add high costs to law enforcement departments. Take Me Home software is provided free to law enforcement for use in squad cars or at the station.

"We want to have the forms and the photographic booth ready, and offer parents the opportunity to be on the forefront of a county-wide information bank that will protect their children," the Rev. Billington said.

Sheriff Brown said his department will look into the capability of its dispatch and records management systems to see if Take Me Home will work locally.

"We'll see if it's something we can integrate into it," the sheriff said. "Conceptually, it's a great idea."

The issue is of particular importance to Sheriff Brown and his wife, Donna - their eldest son is autistic, on a high-functioning level, the sheriff said.

"We certainly applaud Rev. Billington and his wife for putting on this seminar, to give out more information about the potential for confrontation with law enforcement," Sheriff Brown said.

Situations with officers involved can often be bewildering for those with special needs, he added. "And lack of action can be misinterpreted," Sheriff Brown continued. "I'm pleased Rev. Billington has taken the initiative to put this on."

Information on the workshop is being publicized in Spanish as well. The event was funded by a grant from St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bedford, N.Y.

Space is limited and reservations are suggested by emailing the Rev. Billington at jim@hiddenwings.org.

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