Individuals with Autism: Disaster Preparedness and Response Resources for First Responders, Healthcare Providers, and Related Community Stakeholders

November 2026

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that in 2022, approximately 1 in 31 eight-year-old children were classified as having autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and that it was 3.4 times more prevalent among boys than girls.[1] One study estimates 1 in 45 American adults (aged 18-84) are living with autism.[2] While many people with ASD can work or live with little support, others may be limited in communication or nonverbal and need more assistance. Some may have different ways of paying attention, learning, and communicating, making their interactions with first responders challenging, particularly in emergency and disaster scenarios. Some people with ASD (or dementia, including Alzheimer's disease) are at greater risk of wandering from their environments which may also be exacerbated during a natural disaster or other critical incident.[3] Children with autism also have a significantly higher risk of unintentional drowning than the general pediatric population.[4]

On August 21, 2026, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), announced the first National Autism Missing and Endangered Person Alert Initiative. The initiative is designed to strengthen coordination among emergency managers, law enforcement, first responders, and community partners when an autistic child or adult is reported missing. It also addresses wandering and elopement, situations that can pose significant safety risks for autistic individuals, create distress for families and caregivers, and require a rapid, coordinated community response.

To strengthen preparedness and response and help protect lives during disasters and public health emergencies, the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response's Technical Resources, Assistance Center, and Information Exchange (ASPR TRACIE) curated the following resources for **first responders, healthcare providers, public health officials, and emergency managers**. These resources can help our stakeholders better prepare for and respond to the

[1] Prevalence and Early Identification of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 4 and 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 16 Sites, United States, 2022
[2] National and State Estimates of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder
[3] Promising Practices to Address Wandering of Individual with Developmental Disabilities or Dementia
[4] Unintentional Drowning Incidents Involving Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Treated in US Emergency Departments, 2016-2020

needs of autistic individuals, their families and caregivers, and the broader autism community before, during, and after emergencies.

Resources marked with an asterisk appear in more than one category. For additional resources, visit ASPR TRACIE's Populations with Access and Functional Needs and Disasters and At-Risk Populations Topic Collections.

General Resources on Autism Spectrum Disorder and Emergency Preparedness

While many emergency healthcare providers and planners are well-versed in working with people with developmental disabilities, there remains a gap, particularly when it comes to people with autism and especially during and after a disaster. The resources in this section can help familiarize responders with some of the characteristics and needs that people with autism may experience, supporting their inclusion in healthcare emergency planning, response, and recovery.

*Academic Training to Inform Police Responses. (2022). Academic Training Webinar: Policing and People with Developmental Disabilities.

> The speakers in this webinar use a real-life scenario to teach first responders how to use the "assess, identify, communicate, de-escalate" framework during interactions with people with developmental disabilities.

*Academic Training to Inform Police Responses. (2022). Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Bureau of Justice Assistance.

> This set of files includes a PowerPoint presentation (and a PDF of the slides) and a related learning facilitator's guide for a brief role. The presentation describes developmental disabilities (DD) including autism, and fetal alcohol syndrome (and how they overlap with and differ from mental health conditions); and provides communication and identification tips for first responders to improve interactions with people with DDs.

Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response. (n.d.). Disaster Behavioral Health. (Accessed 10/26/2026.)

> This website defines disaster behavioral health, explains concerns that can affect both responders and survivors, and explains the role of disaster behavioral health responders.

*Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response. (n.d.). At-Risk Individuals with Access and Functional Needs. (Accessed 10/26/2026.)

This webpage describes the "Communication, Maintaining health, Independence, Support and Safety, and Transportation" (or CMIST) framework as it relates to integrating people with access and functional needs into disaster planning, response, and recovery.

Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response. (2023). HHS Child and Adolescent Health Emergency Planning Toolkit.

This toolkit can help healthcare, public health, and social services providers address the needs of children and youth with special health care needs in emergency preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation, and community resilience activities.

Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response. (2019). HHS/ASPR Access and Functional Needs (AFN) Web-Based Training.

The HHS/ASPR Access and Functional Needs (AFN) web-based training defines the concept and requirements for addressing people with disabilities and provides tools and resources to help professionals incorporated related concepts into disaster preparedness, response, and recovery activities.

American Red Cross. (2026). Building a More Inclusive Path to Recovery: Sensory Go Bags Debut at the Red Cross House.

Building upon a previous American Red Cross project designed to support neurodiverse individuals and families during disaster recovery, this article shares how a high school student used grant money to create five go bags to support individuals with sensory needs during emergencies. These bags are staged across Southeastern Pennsylvania and include noise-canceling headphones, weighted blankets, fidget toys, and other calming materials.

Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. (2022). Partnering with the Autism Community on Inclusive Emergency Preparedness.

Speakers from the Georgia Department of Public Health discuss the importance of working with the autism community for emergency preparedness in this short video. They emphasize the need for involving disability organizations in planning and training exercises and inviting caregivers to share their insights.

Autism Speaks. (2025). Disaster Preparedness for People with Autism.

In this 30-minute podcast, Bryan Russell, Emergency Management Coordinator with Disability Rights Florida, talks about making sure people with disabilities, including those with autism, are included in emergency preparedness and recovery efforts.

Autism Speaks. (n.d.) Emergency Medical Services (EMS). (Accessed 10/26/2026.)

This webpage provides quick facts on people with autism that can help EMS providers tailor care during emergency situations.

Brasher, S., Middour-Oxler, B., Chambers, R., and Calamaro, C. (2021). Caring for Adults With Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Emergency Department: Lessons Learned From Pediatric Emergency Colleagues. (Abstract only.) Journal of Emergency Nursing. 47(3): 384-389.

The authors note that individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) "use the emergency department at much higher rates than their typically developing peers" and share strategies for healthcare providers to consider when caring for adults with ASD.

Coffey, K., Doherty, D., and Weissman, L. (2020). Caring for Patients with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Keys for Success. OPENPediatrics.

The speakers in this 20-minute video explain how to care for patients with autism in medical settings, outlining three keys to success: preparation (of families before visits), tailoring communication to each patient, and accommodation (e.g., allowing tools or routines in the healthcare setting). Having these strategies in place before a disaster occurs could help ensure a smoother response in the medical setting during an emergency.

*International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2022). Developmental Disabilities: What Law Enforcement Officers Need to Know.

Because people with developmental disabilities (DD) are at a higher risk of victimization, law enforcement and other first responders can benefit from being trained to recognize and respond to them during encounters, particularly higher-stress situations (e.g., disasters). This tip sheet describes encounter characteristics and strategies first responders can use to recognize and better interact with people with DD.

*International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2025). Beyond Compliance: Recognizing High Support Needs Autism in Crisis Response.

This workshop recording can help first responders better understand behaviors exhibited by individuals with developmental disabilities (particularly high support needs autism) that can seem like noncompliance or resistance.

*Lifeworks. (2026.) Autism Law Enforcement Coalition (ALEC).

This training program can help first responders develop a deeper understanding of autism spectrum disorders. Training is geared towards firefighters, law enforcement, and emergency room staff.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.) Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) Who Have Experienced Trauma. (Accessed 10/26/2026.)

These courses can help healthcare providers better understand the impact of traumatic incidents (e.g., disasters) on children with autism and tools and strategies they can use to improve treatment.

Shelter Considerations

Disaster scenarios can feel overwhelming and evacuating to a shelter can be incredibly challenging. For some people with autism, particularly those who thrive on routine and may be troubled by excessive noises, smells, and other variables, the entire experience can lead to withdrawal and/or increased anxiety. The resources in this section can help healthcare responders, emergency managers, and volunteer organizations plan to care for and temporarily house people with autism and other developmental disabilities.

ASERT. (2026). Emergency Preparedness Shelter Toolkits — For Shelter Volunteers. Pennsylvania Department of Human Services.

These tips can help disaster volunteers prepare to support people with sensory needs, including individuals with autism, in a disaster shelter setting. Strategies for communication, addressing sensory differences, and maintaining routines and diets as much as possible are covered and links to related resources are provided.

Autism Society of North Carolina. (n.d.). Disaster Response for Individuals with Autism. (Accessed 10/26/2026.)

This tipsheet can help emergency shelter staff and volunteers provide a safe and comfortable environment for people with autism during a disaster.

Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2010). Guidance on Planning for Integration of Functional Needs Support Services in General Population Shelters.

This guidance document redefines the requirements for inclusion in general population shelters and provides new direction for the approach formerly known as “special needs shelters.” This document describes the national standard for shelter operations that integrate people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs into general population shelters.

National Mass Care Strategy. (2020). Sheltering: Sensory Items.

> Disaster planners and shelter staff can use the information in this fact sheet to stock appropriate sensory items to help reduce stress or overstimulation in children and adults with autism spectrum disorder.

Communication and De-Escalation

ASD can affect the way individuals communicate and interpret social cues and commands. According to Autism Speaks, signs of autism at any age can include avoidance of eye contact, difficulty understanding other people's feelings, repetitive behaviors, and unusual and intense reactions to sounds, smells, tastes, textures, lights, and/or colors. Disaster scenes can be chaotic and accompanied by loud noises, flashing lights, and environmental damage. First responders who have not been trained to recognize signs of autism may unintentionally escalate communications with people who are unable to make eye contact and comprehend traditional commands. Some people with autism use assistive technology to help with communication and interpretation. The following resources highlight information and related courses that can help first responders, medical professionals, and shelter workers better recognize and communicate with disaster survivors with autism.

*Academic Training to Inform Police Responses. (2022). Academic Training Webinar: Policing and People with Developmental Disabilities.

> The speakers in this webinar use a real-life scenario to teach first responders how to use the "assess, identify, communicate, de-escalate" framework during interactions with people with developmental disabilities.

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Resources on Wandering

Many children with autism wander, often towards bodies of water. Unintentional drowning is one of the leading causes of death for children with autism. In 2018, Congress passed Kevin and Avonte's Law (named in honor of two children who died after wandering and drowning, and reauthorized it in 2022), allowing U.S. Department of Justice grant funding to support school and first responder training aimed at preventing wandering and reducing the risk of injury or death. Many of the resources in this category were created with that funding and provide first responders and emergency managers with data and considerations that can be incorporated into community disaster planning.

Home Safe. (2024). Promising Practices to Address Wandering of Individuals with Developmental Disabilities or Dementia.

> This report summarizes promising practices from the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and its partners specific to meeting the needs of individuals who may wander and their loved ones and communities. While not specific to disaster scenarios, the considerations can be incorporated into training and technical assistance provided to and by law enforcement and other first responders.

Home Safe. (2023). Children on the Autism Spectrum: 911 Telecommunicator & Dispatcher Checklist.

> Dispatchers can use this tool to gather critical information on missing children on the autism spectrum. Questions focus on the child's outdoor experience, health/general condition, sensory/behavioral triggers, and communicative/locative technology.

Home Safe. (2023). Children on the Autism Spectrum: Search Protocols & Questionnaire for First Responders.

> This document provides tips for first responders searching for children on the autism spectrum into four categories: the initial response, search and rescue measures, considerations in the event of a prolonged search, and recovery and reunification measures. These considerations and the checklist template can be incorporated into first responder training programs and used in active disaster situations.

Home Safe. (2023). Understanding Children on the Autism Spectrum: A Guide for First Responders.

> In addition to providing an overview of autism spectrum disorders, this guide provides first responders with tips on planning and executing searches for children with autism. These tips and related resources can help first responders in mass casualty incidents and other types of disasters.

International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2022). Exploring Locative Technology: What You Need to Know to Address Wandering. (Free registration required.) Bureau of Justice Assistance.

> This webinar features law enforcement, family members, and disability advocates discussing how to address wandering by individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Speakers also highlight the advantages and disadvantages of using locative or tracking technology.

National Autism Safety Council. (2026). NASC Elopement Fatalities 2026 & 2025.

> This website provides real-time data on autism-related elopement fatalities in the United States, including fatalities by water type. Healthcare and community emergency managers can use this data for general purposes but also to inform disaster planning (e.g., flooding, hurricane).

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (2026). Autism and Wandering.

> As noted on this webpage, "nearly half of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will go missing or elope from their environment." The information and related resources

provided on this page can help first responders better understand related issues and manage incidents involving children on the ASD spectrum (day-to-day and during disasters). Information on hosting sensory friendly events is also included.

Agencies and Organizations

Access the following agencies and organizations to learn more about resources and programs related to people with autism and other individuals with access and functional needs.

- Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response. At-Risk Individuals with Access and Functional Needs.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Autism Spectrum Disorder.
- Health Resources and Services Administration. Autism Programs and Resources.
- National Autism Safety Council. Resources for First Responders.
- The Arc of the United States. Criminal Justice.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Autism Information.

Conclusion

Incorporating all members of the community in disaster planning is key to a smoother response and recovery. The resources in this fact sheet were curated to help ASPR TRACIE stakeholders ensure they are considering the needs of autistic individuals, their families and caregivers, and the broader autism community in all phases of emergency management.