

PFA Tips

What to Prepare for Firefighters and EMS

We don't believe in recreating information that's already out there. This isn't your Fire Safety 101 sheet. (That information is provided below under Additional Resources.) These are considerations we've learned and discussed while teaching firefighters and EMS personnel about autism and other intellectual/developmental disabilities.

Fill out a First Responders Form before you need it

First responders recommend you have 3-4 copies of this form, completed, and hanging on the refrigerator as that is the first place EMS will look. You can download this form created by AWAARE from <http://pathfindersforautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/AWAARE-First-Responders-Form.pdf>

Weigh the risks of your home modifications

If you have a family member that elopes, you may likely have bolts at the top of your exterior doors, key deadbolts, bars on your windows, and reversed door handles on bedroom doors. We will try almost anything to keep a loved one from escaping the home in the middle of the night. Are they safe modifications in the instance of a house fire or other home emergency? Absolutely not. It makes it hard for the first responders to get both in and out of the home. We aren't suggesting you never use those tools – we just want to remind you to consider all risks. And one more thing – all of the strategies mentioned here to keep your family member in, are also strategies used by human traffickers. So understand why police or other first responders called to your home may question your modifications.

Identify your loved one's hiding places

During a fire or other home emergency, your loved one may hide – from first responders, from the chaos, or from the loud noises of the fire alarms, smoke detectors and sirens. And these hiding

spots may not be the typical places where you expect someone to hide, such as under the bed or in a closet. We have a friend whose son hid inside the fireplace, with the glass doors closed. Identifying these unique places where your loved one might hide can quicken a search during an emergency.

Place a decal on your car and home

Pathfinders has created a window cling that can be used on your car's back window, or your house window. Ours states, "Occupant with autism may run away, not respond, resist help."



It also comes with a downloadable information form families can keep in the glove box (as stated on the decal) that provides information including medical as well as triggers and calming strategies. First responders recommend that you print this on bright colored paper so it stands out against the other papers in your glove box. Whether you use a decal created by Pathfinders for Autism or someone else, these will alert first responders during an



emergency situation – especially one where you may not be able to communicate with them.

Utilize some form of personal identification

Displaying information on your refrigerator, or keeping it in your glove box is important, but first responders will tell you that identification and medical information ON the person is the most effective. Medical ID bracelets are the most well-known, but not always practical for someone with sensory issues. Companies such as Road ID (www.roadid.com) and If I Need Help (<https://ifineedhelp.org/>) offer products including shoe tags and clothing patches where a simple click with a smart phone can provide whatever medical information the caregiver chooses to have displayed.

Practice staying outside once exiting the home

Many individuals with autism do not recognize danger and may run back into a burning house. Use social stories, visual cues or other teaching strategies to emphasize the importance of staying outside until the first responders say it is safe to re-enter the home.

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What to Prepare for Fire/EMS – cont.

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**Identify and label fire exits**

Identify at least two fire exits in your home and practice leaving through them from all over the house. You may find you need to provide a visual sign above these exits to help remind your family member which doorways/windows are emergency exits.

Place a whistle/noisemaker next to your family member's bed

This isn't just a good idea for non-verbal individuals as a way for alerting others that there is an emergency, or to help guide first responders to their whereabouts. During times of crisis, an individual who is typically verbal may experience difficulty with language, and may not be able to use verbal communication.

Investigate voice smoke alarm detectors

The loud noise from the smoke alarm detector can make a bad situation worse for your child with autism. Vocal Smoke Alarm Detectors allow you to record your own message that will play when the detector is activated.

Visit your local fire station or attend neighborhood safety events

Imagine the confusion if firefighters forcibly enter your home during chaos with lots of noise and in gear that can make them appear almost non-human. Allowing your family member to experience interactions with firefighters during non-crisis times can help diminish fears and help them understand these are the people to run towards during an emergency.

Additional Resources

For more safety resources, including safety decals, visit the Pathfinders' Safety Page <http://pathfindersforautism.org/resources/safety/>

Fireman Sam US - animated videos about fire safety
<https://www.youtube.com/c/FiremanSamUSA>

PFA Tips: Going to the Hospital
<http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/healthcare/pfa-tips-going-to-the-hospital/>

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