

Navigating Police Interactions for People with Disabilities

Background

People with disabilities are more likely than typically developing peers to have interactions with the justice system and be incarcerated. The Bureau of Justice Statistics published data in 2021 showing that 38% of prisoners had at least one disability.¹ Stops on the street, having police called to the scene, asking an officer for help, or other unplanned interactions with police and first responders can create tremendous stress, which can lead to misunderstandings and dangerous situations.

Preparing

There are lots of ways to prepare for an interaction with the police. Preparation puts people with disabilities in a better position to safely work through these situations. Here are some ways to prepare.

- Make yourself a handwritten or typed card with your name, contact information, address, diagnoses, and information about your needs and communication style to hand to first responders along with your ID. You can use our template at <https://thearcofnova.org/programs-services/library/#c-j-s>
- Write down the words you would want the officer to know and practice saying them. You may want to share your diagnosis and communication style.
- If you see an officer on the street, stop them and tell them you have a disability and would like to practice having a conversation. You can go to your local police precinct and do this, too.
- Say hi to officers on the street. They can get familiar with you and you can get comfortable talking to them.
- Set up a profile with your local Marcus Alert system so first responders know about you and your needs.
- Know your rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). You can ask for “reasonable accommodations” in interactions with police. That could be things like asking for the officer to speak more slowly, write things down, allow someone to help you answer questions, or calling an emergency contact. If things seem to be going poorly in a police interaction, do your best to stay calm. Ask for a CIT (Crisis Intervention Trained) Officer to come as back up and when they arrive, ask for help/accommodations.

Resources

To learn more about how to prepare for any interactions with the justice system and to see more on traffic stops, please check out these resources, in addition to looking into your local Marcus Alert system to enter a profile with 911 at <https://emergencyprofile.org/>

- <https://thearcofnova.org/> to ask a question of our team, including how to get more information on navigating the justice system for people with disabilities.
- bit.ly/DisabilityJusticeVideos for a series of mini-videos on helping people with disabilities navigate 911 calls and police interactions, and other community resources.
- <https://thearcofnova.org/resource-library/#c-j-s> for a written guide for people with disabilities and their families on finding advocates, supportive resources, and accommodation options available.

¹ <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/disabilities-reported-prisoners-survey-prison-inmates-2016>

The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant #90DP0089-01-00). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this document do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.