

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to you because you are on the hearing committee that will be looking at HB 2016 on Tuesday, January 31st. I am a special education teacher who works with students with autism and other cognitive impairments. I want to share some information with you that you can keep in mind as you make a decision about passing this law.

One of the defining characteristics of autism is a difficulty with language. This can be a difficulty in expressive (spoken) language and receptive (understanding) language. People with autism can also have difficulties with social interactions. According to The National Autistic Society, an autistic person may not appear to hear what someone is saying to them. They may not respond to their name. They may seem to not notice or care about any attempts a person makes to interact with them. An autistic person may understand the situation but they may not understand all the words being spoken to them. All of these delays in receptive language skills can potentially be an issue when dealing with a law enforcement agent. A person with autism may appear to not be listening to an officer. They may appear to be resisting arrest as they walk away from the situation. But they may just be struggling to process what is being said to them.

I work in a preschool classroom that is comprised mainly of students with special needs. I have several students with autism. Autism is a spectrum disorder and can present itself in a myriad of ways. I have an autistic student who has high academic and functional life skills, but still needs those extra seconds to process what I am saying to him. Sometimes I have to repeat directions a second time, after giving him 10-15 seconds to think about what I am saying to him. It may appear that he is not listening to me, or doesn't want to do what I have asked of him. But typically with that extra time and repetition of the direction, he will comply with what I ask of him. He is not a defiant child. He simply needs extra processing time because that is need of people with autism. If a police officer is aware that the person they are dealing with has autism, they will know that the person may not immediately comply with their request because that person is still processing what was asked of them.

Another characteristic of autism is persistent difficulties with social skills and social communication. Some autistic people struggle to make eye contact or to continue a conversation with someone else. Some autistic people become stressed by social or new situations. The autistic person may not know how to convey their feelings so they may engage in anxious behaviors, melt down, or try to escape the situation. This could look like resisting arrest, when the person with autism is just seeking to remove themselves from something causing them stress. If a person with autism is encountering law enforcement for the first time, it is a new situation to them, and they may not have the social "rules" in place to help them know how to behave in such a situation.

These characteristics are important for law enforcement to be aware of, so that they understand the motivation behind the individual's actions. When law enforcement can see immediately on the individual's driver's license that they have autism, that officer can then keep these characteristics in mind and modify how they speak to and interact with the person with autism. This will help lead to fewer misunderstandings and could prevent loss of life, as in the case of Joey Weber. I live in Salina, Kansas. Recently our local law enforcement officers went through training to help them to better understand how to work with people with autism and other disabilities. I think that this kind of training, coupled with the "heads up" that a notification on the driver's license would provide, could prevent further tragedies and help police officers to better serve everyone in our communities. I hope you will take action to pass this bill as a way to protect both autistic individuals and police officers alike. Thank you.

Shannon Jones
Special Education Preschool Teacher
Salina, KS