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Police Interaction Course for Students with Autism Hosted by Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital and the DuPage County Sheriff's Department

Wheaton, IL – Flashing lights, sirens, loud voices, commands – a traffic stop is panic inducing for most people, but can escalate into a dangerous situation for people with autism. Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital, a part of Northwestern Medicine, is collaborating with the DuPage County Sheriff's Department to teach young drivers with autism how to respond and comply with police officers' questions during a traffic stop. The first Police Interaction Course will be held Wednesday, June 21 at 3:30 p.m. at Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital in Wheaton.

This course is the first in what organizers hope will develop into a series of small classes of four-to-five students at a time, grouped by diagnostic condition, at the Marianjoy Drivers Rehabilitation Program. Marianjoy occupational therapist Brandon Lesch says many of the students in the program are teens on the autism spectrum and are at higher risk when interacting with police due to social deficits.

"It is our fear that if any of these teens were pulled over, the bright flashing lights, the likelihood of miscommunication and possible misinterpretation of social cues could lead to a negative and potentially dangerous situation," said Lesch. "It is our goal to provide a hands-on course for these teens and their families on what to expect if ever pulled over. We feel all parties will have a better understanding and will be safer and less intimidated as a result."

The course will last two hours, beginning with a presentation by Marianjoy therapists and Dupage County Sheriff's deputies explaining what to do when encountering police officers in uncertain situations. The presentation will include demonstrations of various instruments, such as flashlights and police lights, and an explanation of why they are necessary.

Next, the course will head outside, where students will participate in a series of mock pull-over scenarios. The students will not be driving for the class, but they will be in a driving position, with either a Marianjoy therapist or a parent in the backseat. A police officer in the passenger seat will give instructions on how to safely interact with the approaching officer.

"The partnership the DuPage County Sheriff's Office has forged with the Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital and Northwestern Medicine provides the tools that otherwise may not be available to those with special needs," said DuPage County Undersheriff Frank Bibbiano.

"Preparing the special needs community to interact with police in a positive manner is a priority of our Office and I'm excited for the future of this program."

According to Autism Speaks, a third of teens who have autism without intellectual disability will earn a driver's license. An important aspect of the program will be educating families on how to add disability information to the Illinois Secretary of State driver's license database, and how to obtain the new Disability Wallet Card which tells authorities to not interpret one's behavior as a refusal to cooperate in an effort to explain what its owner may struggle to verbalize.

"It is said if you meet one person with autism, you have only met one person with autism. Autism is a spectrum, and no two cases are alike. We have some students who are very timid and soft-spoken. Other students are hyper-verbal and question everything," said Anne Hegberg, a certified drivers rehabilitation specialist at Marianjoy. "It is important for the police to understand some of the common traits, yet realize the vast range of differences."

Marianjoy's Driver Rehabilitation Center provides driver evaluation and education to help individuals with disabilities learn or re-learn how drive and gain independence. A fleet of adaptive vehicles can be configured to suit individuals with varying disabilities. The center also offers a low-vision program for teens and young adults.

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About Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital

Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital, part of [Northwestern Medicine](#), has been a leader in physical medicine and rehabilitation since 1972, advancing the field with a "high-touch, high-tech" approach. Marianjoy's Wheaton campus is a state-of-the-art facility with 127 beds for acute and subacute care. Marianjoy maintains an extensive network of inpatient, subacute, and outpatient sites, as well as physician clinics throughout the Chicagoland area. To learn more about Marianjoy, please visit www.marianjoy.org.

To learn more about Northwestern Medicine, visit <http://news.nm.org/about-northwestern-medicine.html>.