

# Autism Parenting Magazine

Issue 81

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**BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN KIDS WITH AUTISM**

# JP's Law Passed To Protect All People With Special Needs

By Pam MINES

My 14-year-old son JP has autism. As I'm sure you can understand, while this wasn't something I signed up for, I do believe God chose me and my husband, Perry, to be JP's parents. Being JP's mom has been an unexpected and wonderful experience.

**T**hrough JP, I have become a member of the special needs community. Unless you are directly a part of it, *this* community can be unseen and overlooked. Unlike physical disabilities, people with autism and/or intellectual disabilities are not always readily distinguished and are oftentimes misunderstood. JP, and others like him, need a special kind of advocacy.

In 2013, I began thinking about what might happen if JP ever had an interaction with law enforcement. Let's say he was pulled over for a traffic violation. I quickly became really scared. My concern was not just for JP, but for all those with these different-abilities. It would be reasonable for law enforcement to assume that, since all drivers go through the same process to obtain their driver's licenses, all drivers have the same cognitive abilities. Furthermore, because law enforcement was not taught about this population, how would they know how to recognize that their interaction with this citizen may be different? How would they know how to respond accordingly, or would the citizen's actions warrant a justified shooting? For all the concern one may have about interactions with the police, imagine how much more anxiety you have when it involves your loved one who is not able to communicate effectively?

I decided to do something NOW. I did not want tragedy to dictate the urgency of this necessary change.



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I wanted to do something in honor of my son, not in memory of him. I did not want to hold up a picture sharing who he would have been had he survived a police shooting; rather, I wanted to tell you who he is right now, TODAY! So, I reached out to my then state legislator, Donald McEachin, and together in 2014, we initiated "JP's Law" in my home state of Virginia. "JP's Law" allows individuals to VOLUNTARILY add an innocuous code to their Virginia-issued driver's

licenses and/or identification card noting they have autism or an intellectual disability. This initiative was a collaborative effort. The Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, state police, local police, self-advocates, community leaders, and legislators came together to create the law as well as the code ensuring it was something easy for law enforcement to remember, learn, and understand.

“JP’s Law” helps law enforcement be more aware of an individual’s diagnosis so they can better respond to his/her unique abilities and limitations and avoid heartbreaking tragedies. This is not a pass for those with a diagnosis to “get off” without a ticket or consequence; it is just to let all involved know that the interactions with these individuals may be different than those with someone who is typically developed. Since 2014, I have been training law enforcement in Virginia on “JP’s Law” and how to appropriately interact with those with autism and/or intellectual disabilities.

This legislation has been enthusiastically supported by Virginia law enforcement, and as of April 2018, 1,169 citizens have added the code to their state IDs or driver’s licenses. Senator Mark Warner has said, “The passing of ‘JP’s Law’ in Virginia is a significant step in ensuring that law enforcement can work with teens and adults who have autism and intellectual disabilities. I am proud that the Commonwealth of Virginia is a leader on this important issue. Pam Mines’ tireless advocacy on behalf of children and adults with intellectual disabilities is to be commended.”

City of Richmond Police Chief Alfred Durham says, “Today represents some of the most challenging times for law enforcement agencies across the country. This profession needs to ensure that we are educating and training our employees in best practices when encountering persons with autism and intellectual disabilities. ‘JP’s Law’ has given our department the knowledge and training necessary to handle citizens with these disabilities. Our officers and cadets embrace this Law and this community.”

Sgt. Tim Sutton, a Virginia police officer and a founding member of Heroes 4 Autism, says, “It is imperative that officers not only understand the behaviors related to autism and intellectual disabilities but also have a way to know that the individual they are interacting with may have a special need. ‘JP’s Law’ has



been highly beneficial in Virginia as an indicator on a driver’s license or identification card to alert officers of that special need. Its purpose is to prevent very unfortunate outcomes for the individual and/or officer. ‘JP’s Law’ promotes peaceful encounters resulting in positive outcomes.”

The impact is also felt by parents and community leaders, here in Virginia. Johnny and Kim Moncrief say, «Not everyone knows or sees what is going on with our children and it is nice to have an identification that can let a police officer or first responder know that my child is different and that they may respond different.”

Yvette Ohree says, “In this day and time being a mother of an African American young male is scary. What if he comes in contact with law enforcement or has a medical emergency and is not able to verbally explain himself to tell them of his disability? Therefore, it was important for me and my husband when we heard about ‘JP’s Law’ that we get this ID card for Jordan so that in case of an emergency, not only would law enforcement be able to see that he has a disability, but that they would also be able to see his emergency contact person.”

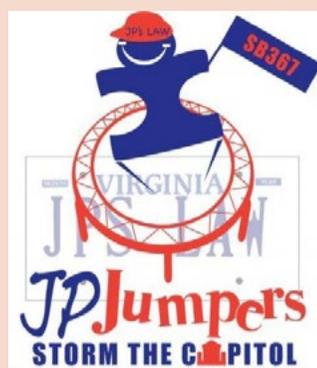
Rick Jeffrey, Special Olympics Virginia president, says, “I am proud that Virginia signed into law Virginia Senate Bill 367, or what is known as ‘JP’s Law.’ With the growing number of individuals (and Special Olympics Virginia athletes) with autism or intellectual disabilities driving, working, traveling and making progress toward full inclusion, ‘JP’s Law’ increases

awareness among law enforcement and helps them better respond to an individual's unique abilities. It helps all of us better respect, consider and remember an unseen community."

My goal is to make "JP's Law" a federal law to help the special needs community and law enforcement nationwide. It is a common-sense law. Everyone that wants to should be able to add this code to their licenses. Just as the organ donor code saves lives, so can the "JP's Law" code. Congressman Donald McEachin (VA-04), who was critical in helping me here in VA, agrees. "My Virginia bill, JP's Law, that I introduced after learning from Pam of some issues facing the autism community can help those individuals in encounters with public safety officials by informing them how to interact with individuals with autism properly. Implementing one standard nationwide would be the best way to continue the progress we made in Virginia."

Ultimately making "JP's Law" a national law will bring awareness to ALL police officers across the country because we will have ONE law, ONE code, ONE training that will save MILLIONS of lives. Stella Smith, a mother whose son Wayne has autism, says it best: "I am thankful that with 'JP's Law,' my son's disability can be properly identified regardless of any situation with law enforcement. It just makes sense that ['JP's Law'] becomes a national law especially with the rise in police shootings across the nation. We as parents want [our children] to be contributing members of society and pray that they will lead the most independent life that their abilities will allow... and to be safe in their everyday encounters. We also support members of law enforcement and want them to be safe as well in protecting our communities. I believe through making 'JP's Law' national and having a working partnership with training on both sides; this goal can be obtained for everyone."

If you are interested in initiating "JP's Law" in your state, or interested in providing support for national legislation, please go to [www.PamMines.com](http://www.PamMines.com) and click on the "Contact Us" tab, or email me at [info@JPJumpersFoundation.org](mailto:info@JPJumpersFoundation.org) with your advocacy interest. Watch my TEDx Talk in which the intent of "JP's Law" is explained in detail: <https://youtu.be/o-qvWiq2Ac>. Together, we can do something important for our children, our loved ones, and our community.



*Pam Mines and her husband Perry have three children: Michelle, Sydnee, and James Perry (JP). In 2005, JP was diagnosed with a developmental delay, and soon after was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Their daughter, Sydnee, joined their family in 2008 after her biological mother, Pam's god-sister, passed away from complications of neurofibromatosis (NF). Sydnee also has NF as well as ADHD. Pam views her children's diagnoses as a blessing and a calling. She has adopted a proactive approach to raising differently abled children and become an advocate for all children and families with special needs. She founded JP Jumpers Foundation to positively impact families affected by autism, special needs, and unique circumstances. Through JP Jumpers Foundation, she has raised money and awareness for both nonprofits and for-profits that serve the autism community. She wrote the book God Chose Me: An Interactive Book to Promote Family Building with her daughter Michelle as the illustrator. God Chose Me serves as a learning tool and guide for children with different abilities. In 2014, Pam led the legislation to establish "JP's Law" (SB367) in Virginia. This law gained bipartisan support and established a special identification card for persons with special needs. This identification card helps law enforcement understand when they may be engaging with someone with special needs. The training programs she has led train law enforcement how to safely, responsibly, and successfully engage in these situations and understand some responses of those with special needs. Her work, advocacy, and ability to inspire meaningful change have been recognized several times over the years. Pam continues to write, speak, give, and advocate. She feels blessed and grateful that God saw fit to trust her with such a tremendous responsibility—to not only be the voice for the special needs community, but to be a voice for those with special needs. This remarkable woman hopes that she will be able to positively impact many, showing them that through their many challenges, they are CHOSEN.*