

ST. PAUL

St. Paul police recognized for work with autistic community

Cops Autism Response Education volunteers hope to spread their teachings across the country.

By Chao Xiong (<https://www.startribune.com/chao-xiong/10646266/>) Star Tribune |

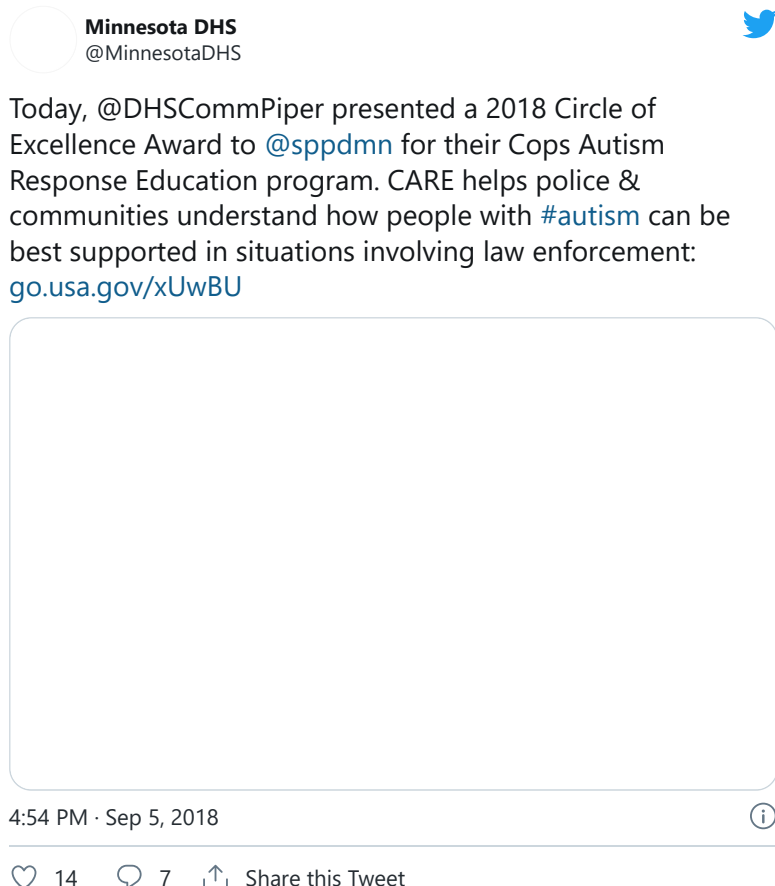
SEPTEMBER 6, 2018 — 9:24PM

When St. Paul police started [the Cops Autism Response Education \(CARE\) program](http://www.startribune.com/a-st-paul-police-officer-is-leading-efforts-to-ensure-encounters-with-autistic-people-end-safely/314794001/) (<http://www.startribune.com/a-st-paul-police-officer-is-leading-efforts-to-ensure-encounters-with-autistic-people-end-safely/314794001/>) in 2015, its goals were simple — reach out to parents of children with autism to improve police responses in their community.

Now the program is being recognized by the Minnesota Department of Human Services for its “innovative” services, and CARE volunteers hope to spread their teachings across the country.

DHS Commissioner Emily Piper on Wednesday presented the department and CARE founding officer Rob Zink with one of its six annual Circle of Excellence Awards.

“We recognize their work as developing best practices, and hope this will grow to law enforcement partners and first responders throughout the state,” Piper said.



LEILA NAVIDI - STAR TRIBUNE

St. Paul Police officer Rob Zink visited in 2015 with Devont'e Ray-Burns, 12, who has autism and other disabilities, outside Ray-Burns'

Zink credited Deputy Chief of Major Crimes Paul Iovino with introducing the concept in response to community frustration with police at calls involving people on the autism spectrum. Iovino sought out Zink's help because two of Zink's three sons have autism. Zink said his sons motivated him.

“You’ve always been creative and served our community well regardless of what they looked like, regardless of who they are,” said Chief Todd Axtell.

The CARE program teaches police how to handle situations involving people on the spectrum and educates families about how police respond to calls. St. Paul police were also reportedly the first department in the state to use a smartphone application (<http://www.startribune.com/st-paul-cops-debut-app-to-help-the-vulnerable/442416333/>) that provides information about a person’s diagnosis, medications, caregiver contact information and suggested ways to calm a person.

“We’ve connected with so many families,” said Charlene Wilford, a CARE volunteer whose son has autism. “I think everybody should be doing” what CARE does.

Chao Xiong is the Hennepin County Courts reporter for the Star Tribune. He previously worked as a Ramsey County, state and Minneapolis general assignment reporter.

cxiong@startribune.com 612-673-4391 ChaoStrib