

OPINION: “Many valid reasons that Sheriff Heroux canceled autism, anti-bullying programs!”

The following is an opinion sent to New Bedford Guide. It does not reflect the opinion of New Bedford Guide, nor is it an OP-ED. In fairness and objectivity, we share opinions from our readers whether we agree or disagree with their opinion.

Do you have a counter opinion to this opinion? Have an opinion about something else? Email us at info@newbedfordguide.com.

The following is a response to an opinion called “Sheriff Heroux is shirking community responsibilities towards autism, anti-bullying,” which itself was a response to an opinion by Betty Ussach called “Bristol County has a new sheriff because Hodgson ignored his major responsibilities.”

“To the editor:

This is a reply to an “anonymous community member” complaining that the Bristol County Sheriff was no longer paying for their child’s autism tracker.

My first thought was that this was a Hodgson supporter squeezing sour grapes. Regardless, let’s address some of the points raised.

The author says sheriffs should be involved in public safety. They are, but everyone has a reasonable role to play. Sheriffs do their part, as mandated by law, to support the police, who are legally tasked with public safety in each community.

The author rages that Sheriff Heroux has “left children and adults with autism, and the families who live with elderly with dementia, all left in the dark. Who is picking up this needed service? He has also left schools across Bristol County with one less educational resource for teaching anti-bullying and social media awareness.” The author also asks: “who will deal with autism and pick up serving families with autistic loved ones?”

How about medical and social service agencies, not corrections officials?

Schools, community leaders, the DA’s office, social service agencies and (if communities so choose) School Resource Officers already deal with bullying. Massachusetts has a resource center for families with autism. The Autism Alliance in Framingham provides support to families. There is an umbrella organization called Advocates for Autism of Massachusetts, which assists families. One of its sister groups in Bristol County is The Arc in Attleboro. There are many more.

The cancelled program the author is so upset about is called Project Lifesaver. It is an expensive program that uses RF technology from the 1980’s, and triggers a search by law enforcement which then uses a tracker to locate the lost person’s RF transmitter. It is a for-profit company that, according to one article, in 2015 was billing families \$210 for a proprietary bracelet and \$25 a month for the location service. In the years since this technology was developed, smart watches, GPS devices, WiFi, and other consumer location and tracking technology have come to the market. Garmin, for example, makes a device that lets family members track loved ones even when they are deep in the wilderness, far out of cell range.

It also turns out that, out of over half a million Bristol County residents, Project Lifesaver was being used by only

about 50 families – at a cost of one correction officer. This was one of Tom Hodgson's many programs that had nothing to do with running a jail, did not concern inmates, but which let him toot his own horn, even if cost Massachusetts taxpayers.

I feel for the parent who wrote the letter, I really do. But let's let autism experts run autism programs, and let's let appropriate agencies and insurance companies pay for the technology to track autistic children and seniors.

And let's let the sheriff run his jail, neither treading on the toes of social service agencies nor families."

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In addition, Sheriff Paul Heroux added:

*"There was one other detail that I don't know if I mentioned, but the bullying program we were offering was actually making kids **worse** off.*

It was increasing the chances that they were going to get involved with juvenile delinquency. The research is very clear that all types of scared straight programs whether they are aversive or non-aversive actually increase kids going to jail or prison later on.

As soon as I found out our SLAM program was a non-aversive, scared straight, I cut that immediately."

Project Lifesaver contacted New Bedford Guide to offer a correction about their company:

"Project Lifesaver is a **for** profit company. We are not a [non-profit company] and never have been. We are a 501 c3 and have been since our beginning in 1999.

PLI does not charge for any service whatsoever. The agency member buys equipment from us and THEY have the option to charge a client or not. We do not tell them how to run their program.

RF technology works much better than Garmin, GPS devices or anything that depends on a satellite for assistance. If this writer had Sirius XM radio in his car, he should go under an overpass or into a garage and see what happens to the signal. Or try to locate someone in Lucas Oil Stadium on a football Sunday. Our 30 minute average time in locating lost people speaks for itself!"