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Center for Digital Government
Honors DDC's Emergency iPhone App

Innovative mobile phone app developed by state employees provides critical assistance to people with Autism Spectrum Disorders in emergency situations

ST. PAUL – The Center for Digital Government announced today that it is honoring the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (DDC) for its development of the Autism Help App for Emergencies. The Digital Government Achievement Award is in the Government-to-Citizen category.

The award recognizes DDC's partnership with the Autism Society of Minnesota in creating a mobile device application that helps people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) to communicate in emergency situations. Innovatively using a proven 5-point, color-coded scale, it can be customized to the specific situation of an individual or family – a key concern given the wide range of ASD needs. The 5-Point Scale was created by Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Beth Curtis of Hamline University, which is a nationally known and accepted system, widely used in public schools.

"For people with ASD, effective communication in emergency situations is a very real and very serious issue," said Colleen Wieck, the Council's Executive Director. "But standard first responder techniques may not work, given ASD-related communication issues involving verbal direction, physical touch and flashing lights. This application is the first mobile, digital technology tool addressing the issue."

The App is easy to use, has no cost to users, and is easily modified and personalized by users. Audio modification has particular significance in the ASD world. In an emergency situation, a calming parent's voice can explain what to do. In a fire situation, for example, it shows a picture of a safe place or meeting place and the parent's voice instructs the person to go there.

The DDC noted in its submission to the Center that emergency calls involving people with ASD are increasing. But people with ASD often have opposite-than-expected reactions, running away from strangers in uniforms and back into the danger itself. Understanding the innovation begins with understanding that people with ASD often will communicate with their families using text messages rather than speaking to the family member standing next to them.

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Spencer Cronk, Commissioner

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"This is a great example of state employees recognizing a dire need and creating an innovative solution with the latest technology," said Spencer Cronk, Commissioner of Administration. "The simplicity of the solution makes the App extremely useable and understandable. With more than 13,000 downloads, the need is obvious."

The App is one part of a web-based, comprehensive emergency planning package for people with ASD providing downloadable tools, training and informational materials, and access to free support tools along with links to other relevant resources. The App also is integral in a first-time effort to train police, fire, and emergency medical responders in working with people with ASD. The App can be found at: http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/autism-5-point-scale-ep/id467303313?mt=8.

The DDC is a division of the Department of Administration. Its mission is to provide information, education, and training to build knowledge, develop skills, and change attitudes that will lead to increased independence, productivity, self-determination, integration and inclusion (IPSII) for people with developmental disabilities and their families. More information is available at www.mnddc.org.

The Center for Digital Government is a national research and advisory institute on information technology policies and best practices in state and local government. Through its diverse and dynamic programs and services, the Center provides public and private sector leaders with decision support, knowledge, and opportunities to help them effectively incorporate new technologies in the 21st century.

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