

The Blue Envelope Program: A Resource for Autistic Drivers

Driving can be stressful, particularly when interacting with law enforcement during traffic stops. For autistic drivers, these situations can present additional challenges due to communication differences and sensory sensitivities. This complexity, coupled with varying levels of awareness and training of law enforcement officers, can lead to unintended, and even tragic, consequences.

To promote safer, more positive encounters, Massachusetts has introduced the [Blue Envelope Program](#). This voluntary initiative provides a simple but effective tool to help bridge the communication gap between autistic drivers and police officers, helping to ensure that traffic stops are handled with greater understanding and care.

“Some people think that autistic people don’t drive,” said Mrs. Stefanie (Stef) Barnard, a nurse at the Lurie Center for Autism. “It’s important that people, including law enforcement officers, understand that there are in fact many autistic drivers and that they may have a different style of communication.”

Mrs. Barnard cares deeply about supporting individuals with autism, both in her professional role at the Lurie Center for Autism and as the mother of a child with autism. She was pleased to see Massachusetts adopt the Blue Envelope Program.

Like the name says, the program utilizes a blue envelope which serves as a tool to alert a police officer that a driver is autistic. The driver can place their important documents in the envelope, such as their license and vehicle registration. The driver simply needs to hand the officer the envelope and, if they feel comfortable, say that they’re autistic. It’s important to note that using the Blue Envelope resource is completely voluntary. If you or your autistic loved one does not want to disclose that they’re autistic to an officer during a traffic stop, they do not have to.

Mrs. Barnard’s husband, Mr. Rich Barnard, is a Massachusetts State Trooper. He has seen that the Blue Envelope can be a great communication tool and a means of continuing to educate officers. Mr. Barnard noted that, “It’s a useful thing for officers who are a week out of the academy and for those who have had 30 years on the job.”

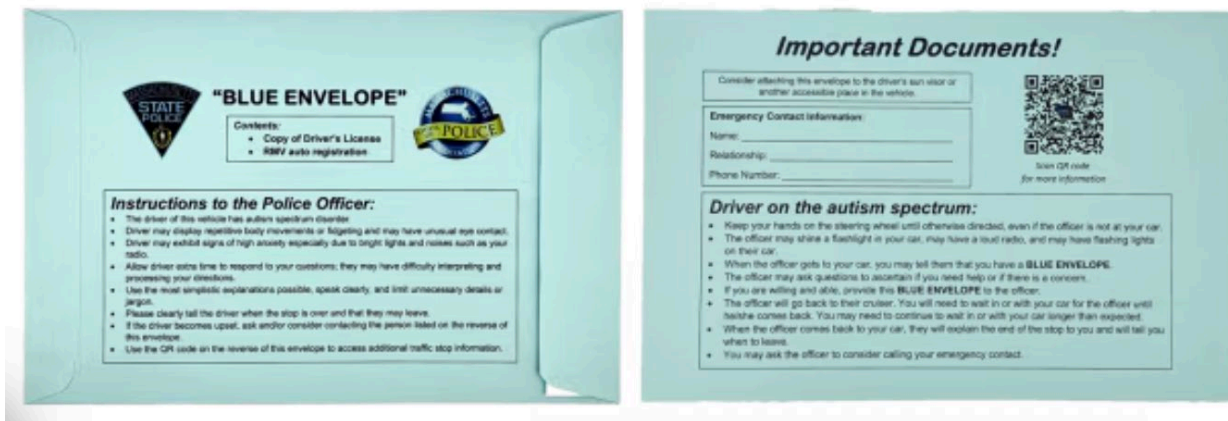
The outside of the envelope contains helpful notes for both the officer and the driver. Reminders are listed, such as:



The Barnard family enjoy a sunny summer day.

- The officer may shine a flashlight in your car.
- The officer may have a loud radio and may have flashing lights on their car.
- Drivers may exhibit signs of high anxiety especially due to bright lights and noises such as the police radio.

These reminders allow both parties to take a step back before a situation becomes tense.



The envelope features critical communication guidelines on its exterior, specifically tailored to assist law enforcement officers in recognizing and adapting their approach when interacting with a driver who has autism.

Additionally, Mr. and Mrs. Barnard highlighted that autistic drivers may want to add emergency contact information to their envelope. This can be particularly helpful in situations in which the driver may struggle to communicate or respond to an officer's questions during a traffic stop. The emergency contact can be called to assist in the communication with the officer, helping to ensure that the situation is handled smoothly and safely.

The Blue Envelope Program was first introduced in the state of Connecticut in 2020 and has since expanded to New Jersey, New York, Maine and California. In January 2024, Massachusetts followed suit, with the senate passing the "Blue Envelope bill." Blue envelopes have been available for public use in Massachusetts since April 2024.

There are multiple ways to get a Blue Envelope for yourself or a loved one. It can be picked up at any Massachusetts State Police barracks. To locate a barracks near you, follow the prompts on the Massachusetts [website](#). The page also allows you to request that a Blue Envelope be mailed to your home. Additionally, some local police stations may have Blue Envelopes, though supply may vary. The Lurie Center for Autism also has Blue Envelopes which can be requested during an appointment at the front desk or by sending a Patient Gateway message. Our family support team members at the center are also available to provide more information about this resource.

When asked about the future of the Blue Envelope Program, the Barnards expressed optimism.

As Mrs. Barnard summarized, “I think with time, programs like this, that serve to empower people with ASD and to educate their communities, will continually develop and become more widely accepted. We have a few years before our son is driving, but I am glad that he will have this kind of resource available to him.”

By Sabrina Ladiwala, Lurie Center for Autism Summer Undergraduate Intern, Class of 2024