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## Blue Envelope Program Aims to Assist Drivers with Special Needs During Traffic Stops

Marsh Garst, Commonwealth's Attorney for Rockingham County and the City of Harrisonburg along with the entire Rockingham County law enforcement community have announced the roll out of the "Blue Envelope Program" to assist special needs drivers and police officers during interactions. The purpose of the Blue Envelope Program is to help vehicle drivers who have conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), communications challenges, dementia, anxiety, or other conditions that might impair their ability to communicate easily during a traffic stop, car accident, or other on-the-road interactions with law enforcement officers.

The program also raises awareness among police regarding this population of drivers and the reactions they may observe during a traffic stop. When the officer approaches the vehicle during a traffic stop, the driver is instructed to inform the police officer that they have a Blue Envelope and then hand the officer the envelope. Inside the blue envelope, the driver is instructed to place a copy of their driver's license, automobile registration and proof of auto insurance along with a form that includes information about the driver's special needs and a contact person, if necessary, to assist with the interaction.

"Traffic stops are a high-stress situation for most people. The operator of the car sees the blue lights come on behind them and they get worried about what they did, if they might get in trouble or if they might get a ticket. Some of our drivers feel this stress on a much higher level," said Garst. "The Blue Envelope Program helps to ensure a safe, positive interaction between police and those who might not respond in ways that an officer or other first responder might expect."

Chief Warner commented with a similar position. "Our police officers and sheriff's deputies are here to protect and serve all our residents and those who travel through our jurisdictions. The Blue Envelope Program is just one more way for us to ensure a safe encounter during a traffic stop. We truly hope the word of the Blue Envelope Program spreads throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Blue Envelope Program, which has been implemented in other parts of the country for autistic drivers, was suggested to Chief Warner by Harrisonburg Fire Chief, Matt Tobia.



The exterior of the blue envelope indicates whether the driver is verbal or non-verbal and instructs the driver to inform a police officer that they have a blue envelope when the officer approaches the vehicle. Instructions for the driver include:

- Keep your hands on the steering wheel unless otherwise directed;
- The officer may shine a flashlight in your car;
- When asked for your vehicle/driver documents, hand the officer this envelope. Information printed on the envelope for police officers includes:
  - Driver may show signs of anxiety due to bright lights and noises;
  - Driver may have difficulty communicating and may not maintain eye contact;
  - Clearly tell the driver when the stop is over and that they can leave.

The special blue envelopes are available for free to all residents and may be picked up at your local police department in Rockingham County, including: Bridgewater Police Department, Broadway Police Department, Dayton Police Department , Elkton Police Department, Grottoes Police Department, Harrisonburg Police Department, Rockingham County Sheriff's Office, and the Timberville Police Department.

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