

Cognitive Disabilities

First Responder Training Video Series—Information Sheet

Provided by the County
of San Diego Office of
Emergency Services

This document provides a brief summary of the information presented in the first responder training video relating to those members of our community who have cognitive disabilities.

Understanding individuals with cognitive disabilities:

- Cognitive disabilities come from a variety of sources, such as right-side strokes, traumatic brain injuries, dementia, and Alzheimer’s disease.
- Cognitive disabilities range from very mild to severe.
- Individuals with cognitive disabilities may demonstrate short term memory issues and may have problems with attention and following a train of thought.

Visual cues to look for:

- Individuals with cognitive disabilities may have a confused facial expression when provided with information and have difficulty making sense of visual and audible cues.
- Look for signs that the individual may be escalating as a result of their inability to process the information around them. They may grow restless, become resistant, show agitation, or become combative.

Best practices for communicating with individuals with cognitive disabilities:

- Introduce yourself, show your badge, and describe why you are there. Be sure to explain the urgency of the situation.
- Always let them know what is going to happen next.
- Speak slowly and in a calm fashion.
- Allow for a delayed response to requests for action so they can process the information.
- Get down on their level when speaking to them and give clear directions—be explicit, concise, and do not use complex words.
- If an individual with a cognitive disability is having difficulty understanding your message, do not speak loudly at them—it will not help them process the information faster.
- When giving instructions, provide them one by one. Each time they complete a step, introduce the next instruction. Be very clear and specific. Do not assume that individuals with cognitive disabilities will follow your instructions if left on their own.
- Do not assume that 100% of what an individual with a cognitive disability says is valid or true.

Special thanks to the following organizations for participating in this video:

San Diego Brain Injury Foundation
San Diego Fire–Rescue
CAL FIRE

