

Tips for EMS Agencies: How to Plan an Open House for Families with Special Health Care Needs

Many ambulance services participate in some version of a “Touch a Truck” event, in which kids and families congregate in a large outdoor area and climb all over EMS, fire, police and other vehicles, meet public safety personnel and learn about safety. The crowded and noisy nature of these events could be overwhelming or difficult to navigate for a child with sensory processing issues or different physical or cognitive abilities, but with a little modification, children of all abilities can experience the fun and education these gatherings offer.

Families with special health care needs may have an increased potential to use emergency medical services, and an opportunity to “preplan” for specific children’s complex medical needs will make care for them more effective and contribute to peace of mind for families and medical staff. One way to connect with families in the community with special health care needs is to have an open house especially for them that is sensitive to different sensory, mobility and health care needs.

How to Hold an Event

Make a Plan

Schedule an open house on an evening or weekend when families can attend together. Invite other public safety personnel and any group that could contribute to greater understanding of/service to families with special needs, like fire, police, dispatch, local public health, IDPH’s EMS for Children coordinator, your agency’s pediatric emergency care coordinator, public works, school nurses, etc. Demonstrations could include station tours, hands-only CPR, operating a fire extinguisher, Smart911, public safety and public works trucks and other vehicles, a fire safety house, operation of the fire hose, an opportunity to try on/observe donning and doffing of fire gear, story time, demonstrations of common pediatric medical equipment, service animals, and more. And, you might consider “swag”—the always-popular freebies for kids to take home like coloring books, fire hats, stickers, etc.*

Promote the Event

Communicate your event to the media, local schools, newspaper ads, Facebook events and posts, Twitter, websites, signs and flyers—the more avenues used to announce the event, the better attended it will be.

Educate Staff

Provide spaces for quiet and sensory-friendly activities, like story time or a table with coloring sheets, in areas removed from high-volume activity. Do not use sirens or lights. Consider that touch is difficult for some children with sensory issues—let the child initiate hugs, and when in doubt allow parents help children into and out of vehicles. Consider spacing of activity stations to allow extra room for wheelchairs, and think through any food offering, as some children with special health care needs can have special diets (sugar free, dye free, allergies, etc.) or swallowing issues. If a fire hose activity is planned, it might be positioned away from other displays to allow children to avoid it if they choose to.

Make sure staff understands verbal ability is not an indicator of cognitive ability, and all children with physical challenges should be assumed to be cognitively typical unless otherwise known. Accommodate as many people as possible—could you provide a sign-language interpreter, or Spanish-speaking (and/or other language) interpreter onsite? Can presenters intentionally use descriptive language and opportunities for touch for visually impaired attendees?

Know that uniforms, particularly fire turnout gear, can be intimidating to children, and allow them to touch badges, helmets, etc. as appropriate. Consider a repeating demonstration of donning and doffing turnout gear as a way of showing children that a regular and approachable person is located inside all that equipment.

Use the open house as an opportunity to become familiar with the children in the community staff might encounter on a medical call, and set the stage for a trusting relationship with EMS. Connect with parents, ask and answer questions and encourage families to complete a Children with Special Health Care Needs Information Form (**insert link to form*). If parents choose, discuss and make notes on the child's condition and attach a note to their dispatch record, in the event of a call from their address. Learn about any special equipment the child uses, and follow up with training for staff on common calls associated with that equipment, like displaced G-tubes or traches, need for suctioning, what to do if a power outage or battery issue disrupts operation of ventilators, etc.

Some parents may have questions about or disclose that a child has an IPOST order (Iowa Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment) regarding end of life care. Refer IPOST questions to Vicki Petersen at IDPH.

Have Fun!

An open house is a great opportunity to connect with the community, gain understanding about potential patients, and help kids learn to not fear public safety providers. An event to showcase great EMS staff and partnerships with other public safety providers, together with a good and educational experience for families, means everybody wins. Kids with special health care needs are, first and foremost, kids. They like cool trucks and free stuff, and with a little preplanning, a visit to your station can be one they'll never forget!

After the Event

Be sure to annotate dispatch records if requested by families, and educate staff on the medical needs of potential patients encountered at the event, if requested to do so. Refresh staff training on issues that might be encountered with specific patients, including atypical vitals, working with traches or home ventilators, g-tubes, transporting patient equipment with the patient, IPOST orders for pediatric patients, what to do in the event of power outages or equipment battery failures, etc.

**IDPH offers Healthy Habit All Stars coloring books, temporary tattoos, videos and activity sheets at no cost. Topics include staying healthy, vaccinations, helmets, concussion and more. See www.idph.iowa.gov/healthyhabitallstars to order.*



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