

TAMPA, FL
Mayor Bob Buckhorn

AUTISM FRIENDLY TAMPA

The City of Tampa's goal is to offer its programs and services in a manner helpful to those with varying communication and environmental needs. Often, individuals with autism who experience sensory overstimulation are unable to participate in standard programs and services. Additionally, their verbal communication abilities may be limited. The City launched the Autism Friendly Tampa initiative in 2017 in recognition of the fact that, while numerous structural and system barriers had been remedied, there continued to be environmental and communication barriers not addressed in codes and regulations for people with autism, their families and caregivers.

According to the CDC, one in 59 children have been identified with autism spectrum disorder. Due to an increasing number of people with autism, Mayor Bob Buckhorn collaborated with the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) at the University of South Florida to increase staff skills and City resources to better serve citizens in an inclusive and welcoming manner. To date, 1,700 staff members have undergone training on autism and relevant sensory and communication needs.

Training efforts have been focused on staff who have the greatest amount of contact with community members – Parks and Recreation, Police, Fire Rescue, Neighborhood Empowerment, and Convention Center staff. Visual communication cards are now available in rescue vehicles operated by Tampa Police and Tampa Fire Rescue to enhance their ability to interact with individuals with limited communication abilities. A special needs registry is now available for people with varying disability limitations that may impact a typical conversation with law enforcement.

Fifteen Parks and Recreation locations are now equipped with "Distract Paks" that contain sensory toys, activities and sensory reduction items to help during interactions. Social Experience stories have been created for several Parks and Recreation features so families and individuals have information prior to their visit. The City was also awarded a grant that allowed for the development of sensory friendly features and equipment at three parks locations, and a sensory garden is now available at Kathryn Malone Center. Parks and Recreation has incorporated "no score" team sports, private swimming lessons, water safety classes, gymnastics, dance, and programs with a Therapeutic Recreation Coordinator. An Advisory Board that is comprised of individuals with autism, parents, service providers and professional experts offers direction and guidance to the City. The City requires all new employees to undergo training on disability awareness, communication skills, and the ADA – an effort to ensure that the inclusive philosophy is imparted throughout all departments.

Mayor Buckhorn's personal dedication to this initiative is seen as key to ensuring that all departments have been fully invested in these efforts. Also, the collaborative partnership with CARD-USF ensured that the City was guided by professional experts who not only work directly with people with autism, their families and caregivers, but also continuously monitor research-based information to develop best practices – a combination that ensured successful progression through each phase of skill and resource development.

Based on accolades from parents and family members of people with autism, City officials believe that more individuals and families with disabilities are benefiting from the enhanced staff skills and additional resources. Positive feedback has been received from agencies providing direct services in the community, as well as from staff members who were previously unaware of issues in this area. The City is committed to continued training of new staff in best practices.

Additional information is available from Raquel Pancho, City of Tampa ADA Coordinator, at raquel.pancho@verizon.net or 813-274-3964.