

To: Mayor Curran and City Commission
From: Alex Rey, City Manager
Date: January 28, 2025
Re: Autism Friendly Designation

In April 2023 the City received the Autism Friendly designation. As a result of this designation, it was ultimately, the beginning steps in the initiative and it is important for the organization to continue moving the designation along. To date, the following initiatives have been incorporated city-wide:

- All city staff are required to watch the autism friendly video upon hiring. A post video questionnaire will be created – Human Resources will segment the video, and each segment will include questionnaires to ensure active engagement.
- In April 2024, Community Development held a Business Workshop that focused on:
How to employ individuals who fall under the spectrum and How to interact with someone on the spectrum.
- Currently, Joe's Pizza and Publix are two established businesses in Cooper City that employ individuals on the spectrum.
- Blue buckets for the annual Halloween Shop to Shop Event – discretely allows for participants to trick or treat without being isolated.
- Communication cards indicating “Trick or Treat” to allow for participants to discretely ask for candy if they need verbal accommodations.
- Light Up Cooper City – Individual, less stimulated meet and greet with Santa if such accommodations are needed.
- Touch A Truck Event – First hour is “horn free” – no horns or loud noises for individuals that are on the spectrum and possibly cannot be exposed to an overstimulated environment
- Summer Camp training by our partners to educate staff on working with individuals on the spectrum
- Sensory Tent – The tent is used for larger scale events. It allows for an area of less stimulation along with sensory items and noise cancelling headphones, etc. and still have participation in the special event.

Before implementation, the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) must approve all proposed changes to autism-friendly programs, signage, training, or resources.



Upcoming implementation steps:

- Spring Egg Hunts – Stamping parents or guardians rather than the kids to provide accommodations if participants are sensitive to touch
- Community Center Lobbies – Adding sensory wall for participants to be able to conduct business and eliminate some interruptions
- Adding sensory/Autism Friendly equipment to playgrounds and play structures. Adding features to outdoor play structures include the following:
 1. Create a calming retreat or welcome play space for everyone
 2. Offer play areas that engages in children’s senses
 3. Define playground boundaries
 4. Consideration of playground layout and color scheme
 5. Offer variety in play spacesThe principles of an Austim friendly designated City will be incorporated in new playground equipment.
- Create signage featuring the Cooper City logo for established businesses certified through our program. Additionally, we will enhance our website to highlight the autism-friendly resources we provide.
- Plans to incorporate more Autism-Friendly awareness on our website and add a section for businesses in Cooper City that have participated in and been certified in our autism-friendly training program.
- Human Resources will categorize job opportunities within the Seal of Cooper City that are suitable for individuals on the spectrum.

In an effort to do so, the City has continued the steps put in place to maintain the the designation, specific to the Parks and Recreation Department, the following are the next initiatives the Department is taking on:

- Continuation and growth of the Sensory Tent
- Add, at a minimum, two (2) additional sensory maps and visuals
- Create sensory walls in Community Center lobbies
- Continue to incorporate Autism Friendly initiatives in Special Events
- Swim Lessons/programs for participants in the need for accommodation outside of regularly scheduled swim lessons

Though the designation is a continuing initiative, the next large element of the designation will be to add sensory zones in the Community Center lobbies. This will provide an area for individuals needing accomodations a space to decompress, while the individual they are accompanying can conduct business. The staff was hoping to codify this through a sponsor, but at this time, staff has not been able to collaborate with an applicable sponsor. Staff will continue with the initiative and work towards creating the sensory zone in the lobbies. If the zone is successful, it will be recommended for other City Departments create a similar zone. The Parks and Recreation Master Plan will also have an ADA plan and additional elements to highlight the Autism Friendly Designation.