

## The Sandy Hook Tragedy

NAMI joins the nation in mourning the senseless and tragic loss of young and innocent lives in Newtown, Connecticut. We also join the nation in calling for action to address the mental health crisis that exists in this country. It should not have taken a national tragedy to recognize this crisis when one considers how many personal tragedies occur daily for Americans affected by mental illness.

NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. President Obama has pledged to use "whatever power this office holds to engage my fellow citizens, from law enforcement to mental health professionals to parents and educators, in an effort to prevent more tragedies."

NAMI represents individuals who actually live with mental illness. We represent parents and families members. We already have a long track record working with law enforcement, educators and mental health professionals. We stand ready to work with the President and Congress.

The following six issues must be addressed in order to improve access to effective mental health care.

- 1. Improve early identification and intervention in mental health care.** Too often, what in hindsight are clear signs of the need for mental health care are not identified until after a crisis happens. It is well documented that timely mental health treatment can prevent crises and foster recovery. The Medicaid Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) mandate has not been effectively implemented in most states for young people with mental health conditions. Similarly private insurance policies often do not support early identification and intervention services. Routine mental health screening should become part of standard practice so mental health conditions are identified early when they can most effectively be treated.
- 2. Provide training to school personnel, law enforcement, families and members of the community on how to identify and respond to youth and adults experiencing mental health crises.** Too often, those in a position to help do not know what to do when a child or adult manifests the early signs and symptoms of mental illness. Education and training for school personnel, law enforcement professionals, families and other community members exist, including Mental Health First Aid, NAMI's Parents and Teachers as Allies, NAMI's Family-to-Family, Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) programs for law enforcement and more. Implementing these programs on a national level represents significant progress in promoting increased awareness and capacity to help those living with mental illnesses. The unfortunate reality is that mental illness and how to respond to it remains a taboo subject for many and we need leadership to help change that. One immediate step that can be taken is enactment of the Mental Health First Aid Higher Education Act (S. 3325/HR 5966).
- 3. Implement school based mental health services and supports.** Drop-out rates among students classified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are alarmingly high, over 50%. We are clearly not addressing the needs of students struggling with mental health conditions in many of our nation's schools. With effective school-based mental health services and supports and coordination with the community mental health system, many of these students could stay in school and earn an academic degree and a more promising future. Yet,

school-based mental health services continue to be cut in far too many schools. Enactment of the Mental Health in Schools Act (HR 751) would represent a positive first step.

- 4. Increase the qualified mental health workforce.** Throughout the nation, there are critical shortages in the availability of qualified mental health professionals. In many communities, children and adults are placed on long waiting lists to access mental health services. Many county and regional mental health agencies have sharply narrowed their criteria for service eligibility because of the lack of qualified mental health professionals. The costs to our nation in increased emergency room use, commitment to inpatient facilities, and incarceration in juvenile and criminal justice facilities are enormous. Strategies for increasing the number of qualified mental health professionals, including providers of peer and family services and supports, must be an integral part of fixing our nation's broken mental health system.
  
- 5. Fully implement key provisions of the Affordable Care Act, including mental health and addictions parity requirements.** Passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was a seminal achievement in improving health and mental health care in this country. We are grateful for your leadership on health care and urge continued leadership in ensuring full and effective implementation of the ACA. One critical step for improving mental health care in America is to issue final regulations defining the scope of the Wellstone and Domenici Mental Health and Addictions Parity Act. Without final regulations, there is a lack of clarity on the requirements for a number of the most complex provisions included in the mental health parity law which threatens to undermine the intent of the law.
  
- 6. Protect federal funding of Medicaid.** Youth and adults with mental illnesses are among the largest, most important class of Medicaid beneficiaries. Forty-eight percent of all public mental health services in America are funded through Medicaid. Reductions in federal funding of Medicaid would have a devastating impact on people with mental illnesses, many of whom rely on this vital safety net program in both maintaining and working toward recovery and independence.

Everyone is affected by mental illness. One in four families is directly affected. But these are also our neighbors, our employees, members of our faith and professional communities and fellow taxpayers. But when diagnosis, treatment and support is not sufficient for the individual, then we also pay in other ways. We pay higher costs for unemployment, homelessness, law enforcement, prisons and jails, school issues and drop outs and higher emergency room and crisis services. But we also may pay in other ways: those limited but tragic times when we all must mourn because lives are lost through violence.