

Mental Health Liaison Group

January 14, 2013

Vice President Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20501

Dear Vice President Biden:

On behalf of the millions of Americans living with mental and substance use disorders, their families and communities, the undersigned mental health organizations join with you and the nation in mourning the senseless and tragic loss of 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.

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG) is dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. In President Obama's remarks in Newtown, he 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."

The Mental Health Liaison Group, a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, parents and family members, advocates, providers, and mental health experts, has long been an important voice on mental health issues. We stand ready to work with you, and will forward to you our specific program recommendations as your Task Force progresses in the coming weeks.

Mental health conditions can become the chronic conditions of our youth if left untreated. Half of all individuals with a mental illness experience the onset – the initial manifestations – of the disorder by the age of 14, but do not seek treatment, on average, until the age of 24. There must be strategies to address this treatment gap.

The following seven issues must be addressed to prevent senseless violence and improve access to effective mental health care.

1. **Improve prevention, early identification, and intervention in mental health care.** It is well-documented that social support and timely mental health treatment can promote well-being and prevent crises. Too often, what in hindsight are clear signs of the need for mental health care are not identified until after a crisis occurs. It is also important to implement programs to respond compassionately to people in crisis and to prevent a crisis from escalating such as the Children's Mental Health Program at the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) and programs like Mental Health First Aid; Crisis Intervention Team programs for first responders (CIT); the Typical or Troubled program; and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN).
2. **Provide mental health and violence-prevention education and training to school personnel, law enforcement, families, primary care physicians, and members of the community to educate them about how to identify and respond to youth and adults experiencing mental health crises, promoted through a public awareness campaign.** 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. The *Mental Health in Schools Act*, legislation that was introduced but not passed in the 112th Congress, includes education and training programs for school personnel, law enforcement professionals, families, and other community members. These programs should also be highlighted in a public awareness campaign.

3. **Implement school-based mental health services and supports.** 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-employed mental health professionals are often the first casualties of school budget cuts, a decision that can negatively affect important services to students and staff.
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.
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.
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 for both working toward and maintaining recovery and independence.
7. **Protect federal funding.** We encourage the Administration to support an increase in funding for mental health supports and services in FY2014 and to stave off any cuts during any fiscal negotiations this spring.

Mr. Vice President, MHLG thanks you for your leadership and stands ready to work with you and the Administration on the goal of improving mental health care in America. We invite you to contact our work group co-chairs, Nancy Trenti at 202/393-6700, ext. 103, or Ron Honberg at 703/516-7972, for comments or with questions.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
 American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry
 American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
 American Association of Pastoral Counselors
 American Association on Health and Disability
 American Counseling Association
 American Dance Therapy Association
 American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
 American Group Psychotherapy Association
 American Mental Health Counselors Association
 American Orthopsychiatric Association
 American Psychiatric Association
 American Psychiatric Nurses Association
 American Psychoanalytic Association
 American Psychological Association
 Anxiety and Depression Association of America
 Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
 Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness

Center for Clinical Social Work
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Clinical Social Work Association
Clinical Social Work Guild 49
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Eating Disorders Coalition
Mental Health America
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors
National Association of Psychiatric Health Systems
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Council for Behavioral Health
National Disability Rights Network
National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
School Social Work Association of America
The Trevor Project
Witness Justice