

The Huffington Post – Letter to New York Delegation: This is about Mental Health Issues

FEATURED ATTORNEY



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By Carolyn Wolf

Dear NY Delegation,

Following the horrific events of Newtown, Conn., we are once again grappling with how something like this could happen, how might it have been prevented, is there a way to learn from this and prevent another such tragedy. The media has been replete with stories regarding not just the families and townspeople whose lives have been forever altered, but about the gunman as well. The issues raised in stories about Adam Lanza have centered around gun control, mental illness, Asperger's syndrome, autism and the possible correlation between violence and video games. The major issue that often gets overlooked is mental health. While gun control certainly must be addressed, mental health needs must take top priority.

I have been actively speaking in the media about the mental health issues as I am in a unique position to do so. I am a mental health attorney and oversee the only mental health law practice in the country which offers to clients a legal/clinical "team" approach to their mental health crises and concerns. I am one of the founding members of NaBITA (the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association), a new membership association for higher education, which is dedicated to the support and professional development of behavioral intervention teams whose purpose is to make campuses safer through education, prevention and intervention. In addition, I teach law and psychiatry at a national law school in New York.

Sadly, although not unexpectedly, once again mental health issues have taken a back seat to gun control and political wrangling. If this is not the time to have a serious and accurate dialogue about mental health issues then it is unclear when that time will come. There is much stigma, misinformation and mischaracterization of mental illness, which needs to be clarified. There is little or no funding for mental

health services across the county, leaving those afflicted with this illness and those who love and care for them without viable interventions and alternatives for diagnosis and treatment. There is once again lost interest in the one national illness that remains hidden, whispered about and only brought to the forefront when there is a mass shooting or other news event. Without equating mental illness with violence, but seeking to address issues of mental illness diagnosis, care and treatment as a whole, we can begin to formulate a realistic plan to assist individuals and families who are forced to suffer in silence. Families come to my practice to seek advice, guidance, planning and strategies for getting their loved one the mental health services they need, be it within the legal or mental health care system or both. But, our toolbox is limited. Inadequate funding and availability of services is the major challenge as well as the balance between individual rights and community interests. We must keep our attention not only on the issue of gun control, which of course must be addressed and laws changed, but on our broken and underfunded, underserved, and unreasonably limited mental health services and systems. We have seen from all of these horrific events in the past several years that people involved in the individual's life, whether a teacher, family member or friend, saw a problem, weren't trained or supported in where to take this problem so no one connected the dots. Thus, the results have been tragic.

Let's keep mental health issues on the front burner. It is our only chance to fuel the fire of change for those who suffer in silence from mental health issues and those who seek to intervene before it is too late. In order to prevent another tragedy, mental health issues need to take precedence over gun control as this lies at the center of the problem. I am asking you for your support in helping raise awareness and funding for this pressing issue.

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