

Bazon Center Statement on Sandy Hook Shooting

Washington -- December 17, 2012 -- The Judge David L. Bazon Center for Mental Health Law joins the rest of the nation in mourning the tragic loss of life at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. While much remains unknown about this incident, it is likely that, once again, two factors are at play: the all-too-easy access to guns, and the lack of access to the crucial community mental health services that people want and need.

With respect to weapons, the Bazon Center believes that no one who is dangerous—whether or not the individual has a mental illness—should have access to guns. In all instances, one's capacity to handle a weapon responsibly should be determined individually, not based solely on a diagnostic label. Restrictions on access to guns should be applied equally to everyone rather than targeting people with mental illnesses.

In the wake of similar tragedies, subsequent discussions concerning mental health services have drifted toward increasing the number of psychiatric hospital beds or making it easier for courts to commit people with mental illnesses to involuntary treatment. In reality, every state has provisions to hospitalize people when they are dangerous to themselves or others as a result of mental illnesses and when less restrictive measures are not appropriate. Moreover, while there may be areas of the country where psychiatric hospital beds are in short supply, nationwide many such beds are occupied by people who simply do not need hospital care.

The real problem is that community based services—including mobile crisis services, assertive community treatment, peer supports and supportive housing—are in short supply, delaying hospital discharges and resulting in mental health crises that could otherwise be prevented. While community mental health programs can offer excellent, comprehensive services, lack of resources has resulted in these services often not being available, except to people who are in immediate crisis and who have already endured multiple hospitalizations.

A stronger commitment to vital community mental health services is long overdue and must be paired with improved gun laws in order to prevent future tragedies. This is a problem of political will; not know-how.

Furthermore, people with mental illnesses are no more violent than people without mental illnesses. Yet, these kind of tragic events unfairly and harmfully tar people with mental illnesses as inherently dangerous. In fact, these Americans not only share the nation's horror at these events, but also bear the additional weight of false stereotypes and discrimination needlessly reinforced by these perceptions.

The Bazon Center is working toward a more humane and just America, where we reduce the likelihood of crises such as we just experienced and where people with mental illnesses can thrive as a part of their communities.