



NASMHPD Urges Public Education and Early Detection of Mental Health Disorders

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The members and staff of the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) are deeply saddened by the tragic shooting in Arizona. We join President Obama and the rest of the nation in extending our sympathies to all of the families who have experienced profound loss as a result of this act.

While we do not yet know if the alleged shooter has a mental illness, the incident has triggered emotional discussions about mental illness, the availability and quality of treatment, and violence and access to firearms. Incidents like this highlight the need for early detection and public education regarding mental illness.

As the discussion advances about how our nation can best help people with mental illness, policymakers and other stakeholders must come together to ensure that all people with mental illness have access to a continuum of mental health services that includes prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery supports. Abundant research supports a range of effective treatment and services available to support the recovery of people experiencing mental illness, and a growing body of research suggests that prevention and early intervention efforts yield positive outcomes. A useful example that NASMHPD recommends for widespread adoption is Mental Health First Aid, a set of skills that equips first responders, educators and the general public with basic skills to identify emerging mental health problems and employ basic interventions to engage and link people with appropriate mental health services. Visit www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org to learn more.

Millions of Americans live with mental illness and contribute positively in their communities. Improvements in treatments and medications over the years have successfully enabled people across the country to recover from mental illness.

NASMHPD cautions against categorizing people with mental illness as violent because it only further stigmatizes the vast majority of those living with mental illness who pose no danger to anyone. This stigma makes it less likely that people will seek or continue in treatment. Research shows that nearly one quarter of Americans will experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives, and that people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it.

NASMHPD represents the state mental health authorities across the country that manage the nation's public mental health system. We stand ready and willing to work with all stakeholders to ensure that public education reaches people of all ages, early detection and intervention are made a priority, and that a continuum of mental health services is available. While public mental health systems cannot prevent all tragedies from occurring, accessible mental health services and a more informed public can minimize the likelihood of violent incidents and improve the lives of people with mental illness.