

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 9, 2013

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
Vice President of the United States
Eisenhower Executive Office Building
1650 Pennsylvania, Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20501

Dear Vice President Biden:

We are writing you to urge the multi-agency gun violence task force to include in its recommendations to Congress H.R. 5989, the Excellence in Mental Health Act, which we plan to reintroduce shortly. We strongly support President Obama's statements in aftermath of the tragic events in Newtown, Connecticut articulating a clear need to increase access to mental health care in America.

We must dramatically bolster the nation's capacity to provide mental health services to those needing care. According to a report prepared for the National Council for Behavioral Healthcare, patients suffering from serious mental illnesses experience difficulty obtaining treatment for their illness. In fact, a 2012 report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) indicates that nearly half of individuals with severe mental disorders do not receive any sort of mental health treatment.

This lack of access has produced two distinct outcomes. First, reports of local law enforcement being forced to respond to psychiatric emergencies have skyrocketed; particularly since widespread state mental health spending cuts began in 2008. This ever worsening phenomenon has jeopardized public safety by diverting front line patrol officers from their traditional policing duties to serving as a component of emergency psychiatric response teams.

Second, emergency departments have been overwhelmed with mentally ill patients lacking alternative treatment options. Numerous studies report a 20 percent increase in psychiatric-induced emergency department (ED) visits in the last three years alone. In fact, a 2010 nationwide survey of over 600 hospital EDs showed that 70% reported boarding psychiatric patients 24 hours or longer while 10% reported boarding times of at least one week. Psychiatric boarding in EDs has resulted in reduced access to ED resources typically used for trauma cases such as heart attacks, strokes, burns and automobile accidents.

The Excellence in Mental Health Act addresses our fragmented mental health system by strengthening America's Community Mental Health Centers. It mandates required evidenced-based services, establishes stringent quality standards and clinical outcome

reporting measures. Additionally, the Excellence Act also authorizes Medicaid payment reforms that will strengthen America's mental health safety net to meet the demands of returning veterans and the Affordable Care Act's insurance coverage expansions.

As the president stated, now is the time to bolster access to mental health care and improve public safety for all Americans. We urge you to include the Excellence in Mental Health Act in the multi-agency task force recommendations to the U.S. Congress.

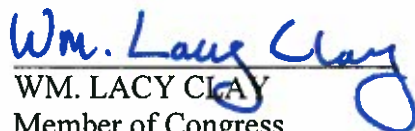
Sincerely,

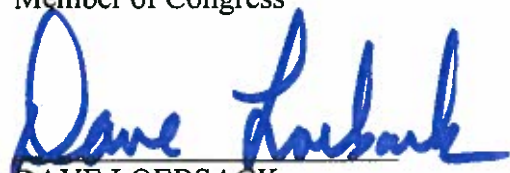

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