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Back in 1999, the Columbine tragedy made it clear that legislation was needed to address students' behavioral health needs and potentially help prevent such incidents. In fact, the Safe Schools and Communities Violence Prevention and Response Plan Act of 2000 was introduced following this event and reintroduced in two subsequent state legislative sessions. Over the past 12 years, several more incidents occurred, further demonstrating the need for this legislation.

The most recent catastrophe is a shooting by an Ohio high school student that resulted in the death of one other teenager and the serious wounding of four others. Although the newspaper accounts of the tragedy do not clearly indicate if mental illness was at the root of the incident, bullying and lack of friends were mentioned as possible factors. "Nevertheless, whether or not mental illness contributes to such behaviors, steps must be taken – perhaps through legislation – to help prevent such disturbing events," said Debra L. Wentz, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA), which represents 170 nonprofit behavioral healthcare provider organizations throughout New Jersey.

"The victims and their family members, friends and teachers need immediate access to services that would help them cope with the shock of this devastating incident and the potential lingering effects on their behavioral health, which could last long after the tragedy occurred," Dr. Wentz said. "What would be even more ideal, however, is to prevent such catastrophes by ensuring that individuals with behavioral health challenges that could lead to violent acts are identified and immediately referred for treatment," Dr. Wentz added, explaining that, contrary to popular belief, violent behavior is rare among individuals with mental illnesses. "Early identification and treatment, and ongoing services are necessary, regardless of how a behavioral health disorder manifests itself," she stressed.

"The Safe Schools and Communities Violence Prevention and Response Plan Act outlines a comprehensive plan for addressing a range of needs to help students cope with tragedies and to identify and treat mental illness before violent incidents take place," Dr. Wentz said. "Clearly, this legislation is long overdue. There have been several wake-up calls — too many — that point to the critical need for this bill to be reintroduced and passed with the necessary funding to ensure that every school district can achieve the goals set forth in the legislation."

The Safe Schools and Communities Violence Prevention and Response Plan Act calls for each

county superintendent to hire a violence prevention specialist, who would work with local community behavioral healthcare providers, school professionals and parents to develop a plan to identify at-risk students and ensure they receive early intervention behavioral health services and to coordinate a behavioral health response in the event of an incident. “We understand that not all schools have the funding or expertise to provide behavioral health services to students. What we can and must do is ensure that school faculty and staff have a plan in place and that they are aware of the community based services available and know how to contact these providers,” Dr. Wentz said. NJAMHAA’s member are listed on the association’s website, www.njamhaa.org, organized by county. This list is accessed by clicking on the “Need Treatment?” box on the left side of the home page.

“Behavioral health services could have helped the young man in Ohio who committed this tragic act to cope with disappointments, frustrations and other challenges in his life and perhaps could have prevented these devastating actions as a result,” Dr. Wentz said. “Having behavioral health services available before, not after, incidents is the right thing to do. NJAMHAA applauds Governor Christie for doing the right thing by preserving funding for community behavioral health services – and, for some services, increasing funding – as part of his proposed budget for FY 2013.”