

Services Can Help Prevent Tragedies like Aurora

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The recent shooting in Aurora, CO, is the latest tragedy on a devastatingly long list of catastrophes from the current decade and the 1990s, let alone numerous others that occurred earlier in the 20th century. All of these events underscore the need for unimpeded access to mental healthcare services, although it must first be emphasized that violent behavior is rare among individuals with mental illness; in fact, individuals with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence, rather than perpetrators. Whether or not a suspect of violent actions is diagnosed with a mental illness, the survivors of such a tragedy and their friends and families may need mental healthcare services to effectively cope with the incident and its potentially lasting impact on their mental and behavioral health, as well as any physical injuries they may



sustain.

We need to take more proactive measures, implement more educational initiatives and encourage more media focus to ensure that people recognize signs of mental illness; know how to encourage individuals to seek help when needed; are familiar with mental healthcare services in their communities; and, above all, understand that mental health disorders are real illnesses that can be treated effectively. With this vital foundation of knowledge and acceptance in place, we could make tremendous, much needed progress toward eliminating stigma and discrimination against individuals with mental illness. If stigma perseveres, the obstacles to accessing behavioral health services will remain standing. If stigma is conquered, some of the barriers can be dismantled.

Other barriers need to be torn down through adequate funding and ongoing support from our leaders in the state and federal governments. Such support is always needed to ensure that the growing number of individuals with these disorders have access to community-based services. Such governmental support is especially critical in the current climate of fiscal challenges and multiple, large-scale changes taking place.

With ongoing support secured and obstacles eradicated, the 25 percent of New Jersey residents who have mental illnesses are more likely to receive the treatment and other support they need. As a result, they will gain tremendous opportunities to realize and achieve their full potential in school, careers, volunteer work, family relationships, friendships and other aspects of their lives.

The factors affecting access to care and the potential for success when needed services are obtained apply equally to substance use disorders, which frequently occur along with mental illnesses and can be treated as effectively as mental health disorders.

Leaders and the public should take a step back and think about any individual who has been negatively affected by the lack of access to behavioral health services. Individuals like James Holmes, the suspect in the Aurora shooting, may come to mind.

We should also think of individuals like 22-year-old Petra Anderson, who miraculously survived the Aurora shooting. With the prospects of a long, physically healthy life, there are chances that the ongoing emotional trauma of the incident and the daunting medical bills (not only for Petra's brain surgery, but also her mother's ongoing cancer treatment) may affect mental health for Petra and her loved ones. Support groups; individual, family or group therapy; or a host of other community-based behavioral health and social services would make a tremendous, positive difference for the Andersons and many other families facing similar struggles.

The prevalence of mental illnesses, addictions and co-occurring disorders is high and continues to grow. Individuals who do not have any of these illnesses are likely to have friends and loved ones who do, and everyone is inevitably affected, especially if the illnesses are treated ineffectively or not treated at all. The community behavioral health system offers a comprehensive array of services that enables individuals in need to achieve and maintain a high quality of life, which could greatly contribute to preventing tragedies.

Services are also available to support friends and family members of individuals with mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders. By building an understanding of these diseases and overcoming any stigma that may be present, friends and relatives can help the individuals they care about to progress in their recovery, which would also help rebuild their relationships with each other.

The New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies urges leaders and the general public to continually strengthen their understanding and acceptance of mental illnesses and addictions, and to support initiatives that aim to ensure access to services for all New Jersey residents.

Everyone deserves to have the greatest opportunities to lead healthy, successful lives. Many individuals rely on the community behavioral health system now to gain such opportunities, and many more will depend on the system in the future.