



The Gift Horse of Mental Health Funding

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[The Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act](#) -- an amendment to the Safe Communities, Safe Schools Act, a sweeping initiative that was being considered in the wake of the shootings in Newtown, CT -- [received nearly unanimous support in the Senate the other week](#). Never look a gift horse in the mouth, so thanks to Congress for the proposed funding.

Nevertheless, the motivation for this wave of generosity is driven by the stigma associated with mental illness. The financial benefit the mental health community may receive is more than offset by its cost, i.e., reinforcing the connection between violence and mental illness in the public perception. Discussing mental health funding in the context of gun violence legislation erroneously transforms a public health issue into a public safety issue. Once again, people with serious mental illness get the blame.

As mental health advocates, we work tirelessly to turn the national spotlight on issues like effective treatment, improved access, and increased funding, but a real dilemma arises if we are forced to address mental health reform within the context of gun violence. When we use the risk of violence as a rationale for better and more available services for people with mental illness, we put at risk all the good works we have done over the years to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. When we conflate mental illness and violence we do ourselves and our community a disservice.

The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, the leading national legal-advocacy organization representing people with mental disabilities, asserts that people with psychiatric disabilities are "a misplaced priority for gun legislation." Bazelon recently announced the release of a paper titled "[Wrong Focus: Mental Health in the Gun Safety Debate](#)" with a thoughtful statement from Jennifer Mathis, Director of Programs.

Ms. Mathis says, "Studies have shown that mental illness by itself is not statistically related to violence, and that people with serious mental illnesses are far more likely to be the victims of violent crimes than the perpetrators. And yet, despite the facts, many lawmakers and journalists continue to stigmatize people with psychiatric disabilities as the primary concern related to gun violence." She goes on to underscore the importance of fixing our mental health system -- the one thing that policy makers and the public seem to agree upon -- but reiterates that it is unlikely to have a significant impact on gun violence.

Community-based services like supported housing, mobile outreach, and supported employment and education programs are effective avenues for people living with mental illness to pursue their goals and build fulfilling lives. When these initiatives are integrated with quality medical and psychiatric care, outcomes are even better -- far more successful and cost-efficient than the current fractured patchwork of emergency rooms, hospitals, and jails that "serve" so many now.

Mental health care reform should be a national priority, because we can help people live better, healthier lives for less money -- not because of an unwarranted fear for our own safety.

People living with mental illness are not just a problem to be dealt with, as indicated by the tenor of the current conversation. They can live full, productive, and satisfying lives as contributing members of our society. Many do. Centers in the community that support recovery and opportunity are crucial, and we enthusiastically support funding initiatives to establish and improve them. However, we are not grateful if it comes at the expense of the reputation of the people they are meant to serve.

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