

Mental Health Services Working Group
Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety
Written Submission VNA Community Healthcare
January 29, 2013

Dear Senator Harp, Representative Wood and members of the Mental Health Services Subcommittee.

I am Janine Fay, CEO of VNA Community Healthcare. We provide home health care to those with mental illness and I offer these thoughts based on our experience with caring for these individuals in the community setting.

Years ago most people with mental illness were kept in the hospital, sometimes for their entire lifetimes. In the wake of de-institutionalization, the majority of those patients are now in the community, many of them living successfully in their own apartments. Every day hundreds of psychiatric nurses in Connecticut make home visits to these clients, administering medications and assessing their mental health status. It is amazing to see how far we have come in supporting community living for this population.

There are several important activities the home care nurse performs, starting with medication administration and management but going well beyond that. The nurse uses her clinical expertise to assess the behaviors exhibited by the client. This assessment includes identifying behaviors that may indicate a risk for violence. Our goal is to always intervene early. On occasion our staff have experienced patients throwing rocks, wielding knives and threatening to shoot others. But this is the exception rather than the rule. We have had minimal violence against our staff and I attribute this to the vigilance of the RN's in the field, their ability to develop trusting relationships with their clients as well as clients' neighbors and friends, and their willingness to go the extra mile in assuring the safety of their clients and the community. They are important eyes and ears in the community and their expertise encourages swift action whenever there is a concerning behavior.

It is easy for those with mental illness to feel isolated. This lack of connections is one variable that can influence violent behavior. The home care nurse provides that connection. In addition to strengthening access to mental health providers, it seems strengthening community supports is critical if we are to make a difference in reducing violent behavior.

I am happy to offer our organization as a resource to the Task Force as it moves forward to develop policy to reduce gun violence. It is time for us all to work together on making the mental health system a true system of care.