

My name is Mary Burnham and I have lived in Newtown for almost 40 years. My children went through the public schools from Hawley Elementary to graduating from Newtown High School. They also attended pre-school in Newtown.

Many years ago, I was a kindergarten teacher in the Westport CT public schools. For 19 years, I was the Director of a State Funded Childcare Center in New Milford CT – a center similar to The Adventure Center here in Sandy Hook. I care deeply about a child's early years.

I am very concerned that your focus and that your "fixes" will be for the public schools grades K-12. I fear you will forget about the Early Childhood Community. I beg you...do not leave these ages Birth-5 out of your "fixes". Remember, prevention saves lives and money! And when you make these "fixes" - --- fund them. Mental health is a concern for everyone.

Common sense: Prevention is far more cost effective than intervention.

Start early, the first 1000 days of life are crucial to a human's mental health. Mental health intervention is currently NOT available for many of our very young children - infants and toddlers. For these children, services must include families, and at the present time, there are few clinicians who can assist with pre-verbal children.

In Connecticut, we have a number of strong outreach, screening, prevention, and clinical mental health programs for our youngest children (*see list below). However, the need for services is far greater than the capacity, making it very difficult to access services.

I cannot tell you how many times as the director of an early childhood center I asked for help with a child who had behavioral problems and was asked, "Are these problems affecting their learning? Does he/she know their numbers, colors, or letters?" In early childhood letters and numbers are one area of learning, but social and emotional is probably the most important area of development!

CT early childhood programs should have available FUNDED, trained, and educated therapists. Additionally, pediatricians along with early childhood staff should be trained to recognize difficulties and assist families in accessing services. Insurance should cover mental health services and therapists must be encouraged to serve those children.

Common sense: Prevention at the early ages can avoid intervention at the later ages. Prevention just might stop killings and suicides.

Common sense: Parents and families must have access to mental health services.

If needed, every child and family in Connecticut from birth through adulthood should have access to mental health services - regardless of the child's residence, whether it is a small town, a city, or a rural area - and regardless of a family's income - rich, poor, or in-between.

Again, prevention is far more cost effective than intervention. I encourage this working group to examine the availability and affordability of programs that assist families before mental health concerns reach the level where an individual harms him/herself or others. We are focused now because of the tragic event on 12/14, but we must also remember the number of individuals who self-medicate or commit suicide, or those who are struggling because of other mental health problems.

Once again, I beg you to FUND mental health for early childhood - include birth to age 5 in your "fixes". Thank you for your attention to these difficult matters.

Mary Burnham 24 Walnut Tree Hill Rd., Sandy Hook, CT 06482 mmijbb@earthlink.net 203-426-3925

(*these include Child FIRST, Child Guidance Clinics, ECCP, Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Head Start Collaborative, Home Visitation, 211, and Help me Grow)