

Testimony to the Mental Health Services Working Group of the Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety

Hello. Thank you for hearing my testimony. My Name is Nelba Marquez-Greene and I am a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. I am the Coordinator for the Outpatient Clinic at Klingberg Family Services and adjunct faculty of Marriage and Family Therapy at CCSU. Today, I am here as expert, victim and grieving mother. My daughter was murdered in Sandy Hook on December 14th by a troubled man with an AR-15. She is survived by a family and community that are forever changed. My prayer is that she will be survived by a state and a country that will utilize this tragedy as an impetus for change. Connecticut is in the position of becoming a model for the nation by improving its mental health delivery system.

There are three key points I would like to address in my testimony:

- 1) The need to de-stigmatize mental health access and treatment
- 2) Identifying and addressing gaps in the state's current mental health system and
- 3) Implementing new family strengthening programs, while enriching existing ones.

1) De-stigmatizing mental health access and treatment

CT must address the de-stigmatization of mental health access and treatment with simple, effective and economically sustainable steps. Many families are hesitant to explore mental health services due to a lack of education or societal stigmatization of mental illness. This results in many families not getting the help they need. One potential solution is to expose families to trained mental health professionals who are integrated in natural settings like schools, churches, libraries and community centers.

If having trained staff within each school is a work in progress toward an overall goal, we should at the very least, assist our schools in providing students with effective mental health supports. School staff should be aware of services available within the community they teach and receive comprehensive in-service trainings regularly to assist them in identifying concerning behaviors such as increased isolation, limited social skills, threatening behavior, bullying or drug use that signal the need for further evaluation.

Along the lines of the country's successful "It Gets Better" campaign in response to the alarming rates of suicide within LGBTQ youth, Connecticut should promote the implementation of PSAs that provide mental health resources and information for caregivers in a strength-based manner. We are physical and emotional beings, and taking care of our 'whole' selves should be the norm for Connecticut and our nation. Paralleling 'emotional wellness' visits along with 'wellness visits' to determine if children are reaching milestones and developing appropriately is an area where there is opportunity for the integration of both physical and emotional wellness:

Responsive, stable, and nurturing relationships between parents and children are the cornerstone of emotional well-being and are necessary for the promotion of healthy functioning and resilience. Parents face multiple stressors and for some, it is difficult for them to focus on the emotional and developmental needs of their children.

It is imperative that the state fully-fund and support programs that offer support to parents. Prevention efforts should include community based parenting groups that provide a supportive environment for parents to share their experiences and work together to be the best parents they can be. It is much more effective to intervene early and promote health and wellness rather than repair damage that often result from warning signs that are ignored.

Peace promotion and violence prevention programming need to continue to be funded and expand for all communities. Many times these programs are implemented in inner cities with little attention given to suburban communities. Mental health issues exist everywhere. Promoting peace and teaching children and each other about ways to cope with the challenges we all face is vital. It is our responsibility to provide all children with an opportunity to learn how develop survival skills to address the stress they encounter.

In closing, I believe that if we de-stigmatize mental health services, address the gaps in our current system and focus on increasing prevention efforts, mental health efforts will improve dramatically within our state. My Ana Grace was murdered. She was six years old. She was one of 26 innocent people massacred senselessly. This tragedy could have been prevented. As a state and nation, both personally and collectively and with organized action, we have to do everything we can to prevent this from happening again. We can achieve this by fostering compassion and treating everyone the way we would want to be treated.

Above all else, Love Wins....