

# Guest Viewpoint: Stopping violence starts with us

David Shapiro 5:07 p.m. EDT October 6, 2015



(Photo: Provided photo)

I am sick of the senseless violence. How many times do I have to turn on the TV and see it all again?

Last week, President Obama spoke about mass shootings now being “routine.” Truer words have rarely been spoken. Unfortunately, it has also become routine for many to draw a connection between mass shootings and mental illness.

I understand why the shooter’s mental state is questioned. After all, who in his right frame of mind would take four guns into Oregon’s Umpqua Community College and kill at least 10 people? This is not rational behavior, and the shooter most certainly was delusional and psychotic.

Yet again and again, the knee-jerk reaction we here from the media is that addressing gun violence can only be done through gun control when in reality, handling mental illness in communities is much more effective. What we should be aiming for is a community and a nation that is welcoming and inclusive; a nation that supports and cares for people in distress and tries to connect with people who otherwise might be facing the world

alone.

Someday soon, we may learn that this shooter was isolated, abused and suffered a traumatic loss. These very real instances of trauma cause significant mental distress and also can dramatically alter one’s brain chemistry. Frequent and repeated trauma further compounds it.

More restrictive gun laws may lead to fewer guns in our communities, but they do not address the root cause of most mass homicides — trauma. Most research indicates that in addition to many of the perpetrators appearing to be mentally ill, they are also often socially marginalized and living in isolation. The solution then is not gun policy, but mental health policy.

What we need is to invest in community mental health and ensure it is accessible. We need to find better approaches to identifying traumatic events and connecting those impacted to the supports they need to heal. Far too often, people in need of mental health supports go unnoticed when they should be accessing professional support.

Access is limited by high-deductible insurance that makes it too costly to see a therapist. Access is limited in schools, where budget shortfalls have led to the elimination of social workers. Access is limited by the economy when parents are forced to work two jobs at the cost of spending quality time with their children. Access is limited by our own choices when we fail to pay attention to the people we see every day exhibiting clear signs of distress.

It is so frustrating that the dialogue after these tragic events is centered on gun control laws. Putting an end to the hate and cruelty that plagues our country starts with each of us. It is for each of us to stand with our neighbors and recognize the significant hardships many people face, and be mindful of the trauma many of our neighbors have experienced.

It is only through this lens that I believe we can put an end to this “routine” and incredibly senseless violence.

David Shapiro is president and CEO of Family and Children’s Service of Ithaca.

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