

Focus also on mental illnesses in gun-violence plan

Advocates glad Obama calls for more funds for diagnosis, care

By [Rita Price](#)

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Advocates for the mentally ill were grateful yesterday to hear President Barack Obama call for more money and attention to their long-running, and sometimes tragic, struggle for care.

Terry Russell, the executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Ohio, said the president's push will help.

"But make no mistake," Russell said. "Mental health is a state and local issue. People are treated where they live, and we need to look at what is happening now in our communities and take steps so that these terrible tragedies don't happen again."

He and others say they're cautiously optimistic that the nation's response to the Sandy Hook shootings won't begin and end with debates about gun control.

"I was very happy to see that the sole focus wasn't just on guns — they listened," said Bernadette Melnyk, dean of the College of Nursing at Ohio State University.

"If you trace the mental health of shooters, there were problems," Melnyk said. "And, unfortunately, those problems didn't get the treatment they needed."

Obama said the nation needs to "work on making access to mental-health care as easy as access to a gun." Fewer than half of all children and adults with diagnosable mental illness get the treatment they need, he said.

The president's plan seeks to:

- Reach 750,000 young people through programs to identify mental illness early and refer them to treatment. A new initiative called Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness And Resilience in Education) would provide \$15 million for "mental-health first-aid" training for teachers and other adults and \$40 million to help schools work with law-enforcement, mental-health and other agencies to make sure students with signs of mental illness are referred to help.
- Provide \$25 million for state-based programs to help people ages 16 to 25 so that they don't fall through the cracks after leaving school or turning 18.
- Help schools address the effects of student exposure to violence by spending \$25 million for services that address trauma, anxiety, conflict resolution or other school-based violence-prevention efforts.
- Train more than 5,000 additional mental-health professionals. Obama proposed \$50 million to provide stipends and tuition reimbursement to train social workers, counselors, psychologists and others serving young people.

- Ensure that insurance plans cover mental-health benefits at parity with other benefits, and make sure that the millions of Americans covered by Medicaid also have good-quality coverage.

Julie Furj-Kuhn, an assistant professor of social work at Cedarville University in Ohio, said better funding is important and so is an open and honest national conversation about mental illness. The stigma, she said, remains overwhelming.

“That’s really one of the main reasons that people defer treatment,” said Furj-Kuhn, a former executive director of NAMI Franklin County. She said the local chapter and others throughout the nation host support groups, meetings and awareness events that could be beneficial beyond just the families involved with the organizations. “If we were willing to bring some of that education out into the open, in schools, universities, communities, it could make such a difference,” Furj-Kuhn said.

Melnyk said a donor gave \$50,000 to try out a mental-health program in a school in Appalachian Ohio. Modeled after a federally funded study that Melnyk started in Phoenix, the Ohio project trains teachers, guidance counselors and others to provide behavioral therapy.

“We live at a time when we have a severe shortage of mental-health providers,” she said.

Russell said families who deal with mental illness issues are desperate for some progress to come out of the shootings in Newtown, Conn.

“This incident put the members of my organization on their knees,” he said. “It hit every fiber of their being. They said, ‘This could be us.’”

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