

The Aurora shooting anniversary: Has mental health care improved?



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In the year since the Colorado movie-theater massacre that killed 12 and left 70 others injured, the role of mental illness in mass shootings has jumped to the forefront of public debate.

But as Saturday brings the first anniversary of the Aurora shooting, how much has actually changed about the way our country handles mental health care?

After years of spending cuts, advocates say states and the federal government have moved to reinvest in programs for the mentally ill. And they say the Newtown massacre forced the issue as much as the Aurora theater rampage.

In Colorado, Gov. John Hickenlooper signed a bill in May providing nearly \$20 million in new funding for mental health services. The state plans to use the investment to establish walk-in crisis centers, a 24-hour mental health hotline, and mobile units to provide on-the-spot mental health services. Though the Aurora shooting was not the only factor leading state lawmakers to push for mental health reform, it “certainly” helped spur change, Moe Keller of Mental Health America of Colorado said.

“This has been the most productive year in terms of mental health services that I have ever seen in the state legislature, and I’ve been there since 1992,” Keller, vice president of public policy for the advocacy group, said by telephone Wednesday. “We’ve had decades of reductions in funding. It’s been cuts, cuts, cuts. And this has been true across the country.”

On the national level, it was the mass murder of 20 children and six adults in Newtown, Conn., not the Aurora shooting, that has spurred policy makers to focus on mental health care, said Bob Carolla, a spokesman for the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

“Mental Health was not really on the radar or the agenda,” Carolla said by phone Wednesday. “Then Newtown happened, and the level of media attention and the level of public concern shifted exponentially.”

In January, just one month after the Newtown shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, President Barack Obama introduced several mental health initiatives in his plan to reduce gun violence. They included placing as many as 1,000 more resource officers and mental health professionals in schools, “mental health first aid” training for teachers, and finalizing requirements in the Affordable Care Act for private health insurance plans to cover mental health services. To pay for the initiatives, Obama’s budget proposal, unveiled in April, included \$235 million in funding for new mental health programs. That funding has yet to pass as budget battles loom in Congress.

As of February, state lawmakers nationwide had filed approximately 60 bills dealing with mental health issues, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Of those, 19 continued or created funding for mental health emergencies, beds for mental health patients, or programs for adults or children, while another nine reinstated state funding for mental health and substance abuse programs. Seven bills, among them one in Florida, two in Maryland and four in Minnesota, addressed security or mental health programs in public schools. And legislators in one state, Utah, proposed changes to the state’s involuntary commitment law.

By June, “nearly every state had proposed something related to some aspect of mental health services/providers,” Karmen Hanson, program manager for the National Conference of State Legislatures said in an email Wednesday.

In 2011, the most recent year data is available, there were an estimated 11.5 million adults age 18 or older in the United States with a serious mental illness, or 5 percent of adults, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services. Mental health experts emphasize that the vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent.

States nationwide have cut funding for mental health care for many years, Keller said. Decades ago, as authorities moved away from committing the insane to mental institutions, the public sector created programs to support the mentally ill in their communities. But over the years budget cuts have chipped those programs away, she said.

“What we did was make our police departments the first responders for mental health, and we made jails and prisons the new institutions,” Keller said. “In my opinion we are just starting to reinvest in the mental health systems that will keep people out of emergency rooms, out of police cars and jails and out of prisons.”

In addition to proposals to improve mental health care, some state legislatures have either passed or are considering measures to keep guns out of the hands of those with severe mental illnesses. Last month Florida passed a law that requires people who volunteer for mental health treatment to give up their gun rights. State law had previously only prohibited those who were involuntary committed from buying a gun. In Pennsylvania, a bill is pending to mandate background checks for all firearms purchases.

A bill that would have expanded background checks for all gun purchases nationwide died in the Senate in April when it was opposed by 41 Republicans and five Democrats.



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