



Southwestern
Pennsylvania

Contact: Darcey Garda
dgarda@namiswpa.org
(412) 366-3788

For Immediate Release

Navy Shipyard Tragedy: NAMI Calls on Congress for Immediate Action on Mental Health

Arlington, Va.—In the wake of the Navy Yard tragedy, the National Alliance on Mental Illness ([NAMI](#)) has called on the President and Congress to act immediately on mental health legislation that has been stalled since the collapse of the gun debate earlier this year.

"Congress has bills introduced that are about mental health. They are not about guns," said NAMI Executive Director Mike Fitzpatrick. "They are modest proposals that will at least begin to make a difference."

"Mental illness does not discriminate between Republicans and Democrats. The bills are bipartisan. There is no reason that they cannot be enacted before the first anniversary of the Newtown tragedy in December."

In a broader statement addressing issues reflected in the Navy Shipyard tragedy on Sept. 16, Fitzpatrick declared:

"Once again, the country is reeling from a senseless act of mass violence. Families and friends are grieving the loss of 12 innocent lives. Although information about the tragedy is still emerging, it is clear that the gunman lived with mental health issues for many years. In recent weeks, his symptoms seemed like some associated with psychosis, such as extreme paranoia.

His struggles were not a secret. People who knew him observed symptoms of mental health disorders. He had brushes with the law over the years, including misconduct with guns. He had at least eight disciplinary infractions during the time he served in the Navy Reserve. Just last month, Newport, R.I.'s police responded to a call for help from him and were so concerned about his mental health that they reported their concerns to the Navy. Yet nothing apparently was done at the time of these events to get him the mental health evaluation and care that might have averted tragedy.

The Navy Shipyard tragedy shares common factors with others, such as Virginia Tech, Tucson, Aurora and Newtown. The common denominator is an individual struggling with mental illness with other people being aware of problems, but no meaningful action being taken in time to connect the person with effective services or support. Common factors include failures of understanding, resources, engagement, coordination or accountability. They can occur in schools, the health care system, law enforcement or the criminal justice system. Too often, there are no clear points of responsibility and few protocols.

(continued)

Too often, the response to people experiencing psychiatric crisis in the United States bears little resemblance to the response given other medical conditions. People do not know where to turn for help. Treatment is unavailable or not provided until an emergency occurs.

Furthermore, care often lasts only until the emergency is over. Few people would expect, however, that a person having a heart attack would be given CPR, only to receive little or no care after being resuscitated. We would never tolerate such a system for any other health condition.

Concrete steps can be taken immediately to address our nation's mental health care crisis and help prevent future tragedies. For example:

- Congress should immediately pass existing legislation introduced following the Newtown tragedy last year: the Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act (S. 689), the Excellence in Mental Health Act (S. 264; HR 1263) and the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Act (S. 162; HR 461). These are modest proposals that will at least help make a difference.
- All communities should have Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) involving police, mental health professionals and other partners. Approximately 2800 communities in the United States currently have CIT programs that that give police skills to handle psychiatric crises and get them to medical care.
- All communities should have mental health courts to help get treatment for people struggling with mental illness who commit non-violent offenses.
- Public education on mental health should be conducted throughout every community, including schools, military installations and veterans' facilities. Family education and support must also be integrated and routine within the mental health care system. Everyone should know symptoms and appropriate responses for mental health problems-free from prejudice or discrimination.
- Greater research is needed into how to engage more effectively individuals who are at risk of harm to themselves or others, in order to improve initial evaluations and ongoing treatment.

“As a nation, let's not wait again to act.”

About NAMI

NAMI (the National Alliance on Mental Illness) is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.

NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania (an affiliate of NAMI) is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness through recovery focused support, education and advocacy. More information is available at www.namiswa.org or by calling (412) 366-3788.

###