



NATIONAL SHERIFFS' ASSOCIATION

SHERIFF LARRY D. AMERSON
President 2012 - 2013

January 8, 2013

The Vice President of the United States
Old Executive Office Building
Washington, DC 20501

Dear Mr. Vice President:

On behalf of the nation's more than 3,000 sheriffs, I thank you for inviting the National Sheriffs' Association (NSA) to participate in the Administration's discussion on ways to prevent another tragedy like the recent school shooting in Newtown, CT. As we stated at your December 20th meeting, NSA believes that a comprehensive approach that focuses on mental health issues is the only way to prevent future tragedies.

The mental health system in our country does not adequately serve the mentally ill or society. This nation's correctional facilities have become de facto mental health facilities but cannot provide adequate mental health services. Instead of incarcerating those persons with mental illness and subjecting them and society to a revolving-door system, increased funding and additional resources should be made available for our mental health system.

More funding and resources are also needed by law enforcement so that we can better respond to mentally ill persons. Many of these persons are in our jails every day and the average Sheriff's Office has a critical need to provide better services while they are incarcerated. Twenty-five percent of all jail inmates at any one time have mental/emotional problems. Sheriffs can be part of the solution if we have available treatment services; but, the average jail does not provide them.

Furthermore, additional mental health resources are needed by our schools as teachers are often the first to identify a child with mental health concerns. Teachers, parents, and School Resource Officers should work together as a team to pro-actively identify and offer assistance to those students and their families. This model has worked successfully in my own jurisdiction of Calhoun County, Alabama, where more than 2,000 young people have received services that include 24-hour counseling support via telephone, parental training courses, and law enforcement response to the family residence in times of trouble. Community programs like the ones in Calhoun County can help everyone better recognize those students and families in need of mental health support, and provide earlier intervention and comprehensive treatment services.

Finally, NSA also supports mental health background checks for gun purchases.

In closing, there is, admittedly, no simple solution to preventing future tragedies like the one in Newtown. However, I am encouraged by your outreach to NSA, and we pledge to join the Administration in working towards a solution.

Most respectfully,

Sheriff Larry Amerson