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# Jared Loughner Attack on Gabrielle Giffords: America's Mental Health Breakdown

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The tragic and devastating attack in Tucson, Arizona on U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords and other innocent victims including the killing of a 9-year-old girl and a federal judge was, sadly, preventable if the exceedingly ineffective mental health laws in America were changed. America's mental health system is undeniably broken and must be fixed to ensure that those who need treatment be required to receive it for the safety and well being of society as a whole.

If any good is to come out of this horrifying event it must be for legislators on federal, state and local levels to undertake immediate in-depth hearings that lead to a definitive change of America's laws for treating mental health patients. Insurance companies must be required to provide the same health benefits for mental disease as they do for all other illnesses so that patients can be properly treated. Legislators must publicly interview expert witnesses who deal on a daily basis with the overwhelmingly bureaucratic and legal obstacles in their efforts to try to help people with mental diseases. To this end, legislators must listen to family members, law enforcement, medical professionals and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI); these are the ones who know the solutions as well as the obstacles.

As information of this chaotic episode, initially referred to as an "assassination attack," evolved and was shared by the media, most people rushed to the conclusion that either drug cartel gangsters or terrorists from Mexico, the Middle East or our own homegrown extremists were responsible. It was only when the perpetrator was finally identified as a young 22-year-old white male and his irrational Internet rants were read that the media began to describe him as "one of the crazies" or "nuts."

This label is particularly painful for those who are advocates for proactively treating people with mental disorders. Loughner's classmates are [reported](#) as stating that he was "consistently disruptive in class" and "obviously very disturbed." Yet who reported this troubling behavior to any officials that could have tried to help him and what steps if any, were taken, one must inquire. The bar is so high for proving someone is a threat to themselves or to others that they literally have to already be in the middle of a horrendous act like this vicious attack for law enforcement, family or medical professionals to be able to provide treatment to the disturbed person. What a travesty of justice for all concerned! Throughout the day the focus of the media was understandably on the condition of Representative Giffords presuming that she was the primary target which is probably why the main experts commenting, at least initially, have been from the FBI, Secret Service, Homeland Security and other government officials as opposed to interviewing mental health experts to better understand the how and why this happened. Mental illness may not be an excuse for crimes but it certainly can be what caused and motivated someone to commit a crime if the person goes untreated. Begging one to consider who is ultimately responsible for these heinous acts and to discuss if there is any culpability by those that ignore the dire need and calamitous consequences of leaving the current mental health laws we have unchanged.

There is a critical breakdown of mental health care in America because it is not considered a disease that is popular to address and there is a definite stigma attached to admitting mental illness. We can and must do something about it before more innocent lives are lost including the lives of the sick and untreated, some who may become perpetrators of crimes. Laws must be enacted that allow for the hospitalization and proper medical treatment for the amount of time necessary for recovery followed by compassionate care in a professional locked or unlocked facility depending on the condition of the patient until they are able to function in society and they should be assisted to become a contributing member of the community.

Seventy-two hours, 14 days or even 30 days is not adequate for treating mental health or substance abuse patients, so they constantly are walking through a revolving door. One of those revolving doors for a sick person can be into a local market armed with violent thoughts, until we change the laws. There must be legal avenues that are not onerous and debilitating emotionally and financially for families to help their loved ones. It is critical that there be ongoing counseling, therapy and monitoring of the compliance of proper medication being taken by the patient to treat the chemical imbalance that causes mental diseases such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder and bi-polar disorder. For the record, many times this chemical imbalance is triggered by the use of illegal drugs -- especially marijuana and ecstasy are culprits particularly if there is any hereditary pre-disposition according to in-depth studies and analysis by leading psychiatrists in Switzerland and Germany. It's worth noting that Loughner is reported to have a long history of marijuana use. Another country with a long history of how the mental health system should work is Ireland where there are a high proportion of families who have loved ones with a mental disease. I have participated in numerous conferences with the most respected psychiatrists in these countries and have found their experience to be enormously helpful for America to embrace.

According to mental health professional and expert F. Fuller Torrey in his 2008 research book called *The Insanity Defense: How America's Failure to Treat the Seriously Mentally Ill Endangers Its Citizens* we are informed that 4,000,000 Americans are believed to have severe psychiatric disorders with a subset of 400,000 homeless and untreated not complying with their needed medications and another sub-sub set of 40,000 considered the most dangerous, not being treated or taking meds and demonstrating very violent behavior. This count does not include the vast numbers who are not properly diagnosed in our nation.

Prisons have become the new mental health institutions across America. A perfect example of this is the Twin Towers Jail in downtown Los Angeles. It was built in recent years to house prisoners but instead it is the solution for housing patients that have committed crimes because they are free to do so of their own volition instead of being required to comply with mental health treatment. There are more than 100,000 people living on the streets of Los Angeles that are homeless. Recent studies undertaken by U.S.C. and provided by First AME Church in Los Angeles indicate that more than half of these fellow citizens should be in health care facilities being treated for mental disease, drug addiction and substance abuse.

For as long as I can remember I have worked to help those with mental diseases and addictions both within my family as well as caring for those who are on the streets. I have personally witnessed every aspect of the mental health debacle in California and in our nation from the nineteen sixties until today including the defunding and the pleas for help by the people and families affected directly by it. Unfortunately, the overwhelming consensus by these distressed families, frustrated law enforcement and medical field professionals is that the ACLU by fighting and providing funding for laws that supposedly protect the rights of those afflicted with mental diseases have actually done more to ruin their lives than to help them.

Funding for mental health, or more accurately the lack of funding for it, is one of the major hurdles that must be overcome. Our nation's economic woes make it an even greater challenge for the 112th Congress that Speaker of the House Boehner recently swore Representative Giffords in to serve. However as a nation with a conscience if we do NOT invest the time and resources on the critical breakdown of mental health care in America, today's violent tragedy in Arizona will be

repeated somewhere else, in some way, tomorrow and the day after until we change the laws. The mental health researcher Torrey points to the killing of former Congressman Allard Lowenstein on March 12, 1980 by Stanford graduate Dennis Sweeney who shot him and was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia but left untreated.

As a businessperson, I know what it means to make tough fiscal choices and as a mother I know what it mean to use "tough love" measures. We need new legislation that encompasses both of these considerations. For the families who lost their loved ones and to those who found theirs injured, our thoughts and prayers are with them. We continue to pray for Gabrielle Giffords, whose recovery thus far from a "bullet to the brain" is nothing short of miraculous. We should also convey our sympathy for the family of Jared Loughner who may have seen the signs of his illness as illustrated in his delusional rants and nonsensical ramblings on the internet but like all who have tried to help loved ones, they may have found it to be disheartening and impossible until the critical breakdown of America's mental health care is addressed and the laws are changed to protect the victims and pro-actively treat the sick perpetrator.

There were many heroic efforts in Tucson of people helping to save lives and comfort the afflicted as a result of this tragedy; hopefully these words from The Book of Job are an inspirational reminder during this time of deep sadness in Arizona and across America:

"When I smiled on them they were reassured; mourners took comfort from my cheerful glance, I chose out their way and presided; I took a king's place in the armed forces. Whoever heard of me blessed me; those who saw me commended me. For I rescued the poor who cried out for help, the orphans, and the unassisted; The blessing of those in extremity came upon me, and the heart of the widow I made joyful. I wore my honesty like a garment; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame was I; (Job 29:24-25,11-15)."

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