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California State Senate

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PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE
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STANDING COMMITTEES:
SENATE RULES
CHAIR
APPROPRIATIONS
PUBLIC SAFETY

December 20, 2012

The Honorable Joseph Biden
Vice President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20501

Dear Mr. Vice President:

It is with pleasure that I read the President's announcement that you will lead the White House initiative tasked with identifying concrete proposals for tackling the culture of gun violence, which has become pervasive within our nation. Your vision and determination forced the nation's first assault weapons ban, a goal that we have protected and continue to enforce in the State of California.

There are an estimated 300 million guns in roughly 40 percent of American households. Billions of ammunition rounds have seeped into our communities. As we are learning from the Sandy Hook tragedy, even the guns of responsible, legal owners can fall into the wrong hands.

We must therefore focus our efforts on multiple fronts to curb disturbingly familiar and horrific scenes of mass murder. It is necessary, but not sufficient, to simply impose restrictions on ownership by those with a mental illness diagnosis or adjudication.

We must address what may drive some who are in mental distress to harm themselves or others with those guns. Among the forefront of reforms must be the strengthening of, and access to, mental health services.

There is a danger of linking mental illness to violence. It is a fact that most people suffering quietly from mental illnesses aren't criminals, let alone mass murderers. Sadly, many who do

suffer lack access to, or knowledge of, the care and community support that may have prevented their victimization of others. That includes their families and others who are struggling to care for them.

I am the author of California's Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), passed by voters in 2004 to provide one-billion dollars annually for innovative mental health services, abandoning the traditional "Crisis-First" model by investing twenty percent of revenues into prevention and early intervention programs.

The MHSA contains other key components, summarized in the enclosed document, including a "whatever-it-takes" approach to support and services for people with severe mental illness. This can include providing a safe place to live, a job, help in school, physical health care, clothing, food, or treatment when a mental illness and a substance abuse disorder are combined. We are expanding mental health services on college campuses and expanding suicide prevention programs.

The MHSA approach is the first of its kind in the nation and is dramatically improving the quality of life for many of the 27,000 Californians currently enrolled in these "whatever-it-takes" programs, plus tens of thousands of others benefitting from Prevention and Early Interventional services, while returning significant taxpayer savings.

An evaluation report has found that every dollar spent on mental health services in California saved roughly $0.88 in costs to the criminal justice and health, and housing services by reducing the number of arrests, incarcerations, ER visits, and hospitalizations.

We are saving lives in California and I firmly believe that more can and should be done, nationally.

I strongly urge, therefore, that your taskforce examine California's Mental Health Services Act and propose that the federal government establish MHSA as the model upon which a national system of mental health care should be built.

There is no dispute that in California and across the nation, mental health services remain grossly underfunded. While Proposition 63 generates a billion dollars of investment annually for the MHSA, recession-induced budget cuts have reduced funding for mental health programs outside of the Proposition 63 mandate by about $700 million.

Specifically, while fully cognizant of the fiscal situation at the federal level, I propose that the Federal Government match dollar-for-dollar any resources states are willing to spend to build decent, cost-effective, and life-saving mental health care.

If any state were to implement a system proportionate to the size of California's Mental Health Services Act, a dollar-for-dollar match would result in roughly $20 billion annually for these services nationally.

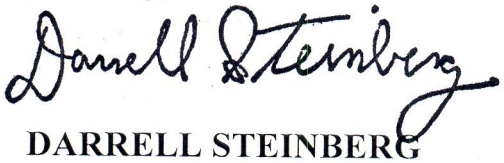
Mental health lies closer to home than many are willing to accept. More than one in four U.S. adults suffers annually some form of mental illness or substance abuse. That includes familiar diagnoses like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, post-natal depression, and ADHD.

Many cases are mild but 14% of the population suffers from moderate or severe mental illness. A near-totality of whom will *never* take an assault weapon to a public place and repeat last week's travesty, for which we still grieve.

In recent years, flaws in access and provision of mental health services have been laid bare before a global audience with increasing regularity. Tragically, the base of evidence extends grossly beyond the horror unleashed on Newtown, Connecticut last Friday.

There are clear problems and a desperate need to solve them. The role of the state and the federal government is also clear. The price of doing nothing is much too high for our country to bear.

Sincerely,



DARRELL STEINBERG
President pro Tempore
Sixth Senate District

DS: RW