



**Written Testimony for the  
Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on Gun Violence  
and Mental Health**

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As leaders in Mental Health advocacy in Pennsylvania, we must ensure that there is fair and full dialogue included in the hearing today related to the issue of mental health and violence. Individuals with mental health disabilities often face stigma and bias because of the false narrative that people with mental illness are dangerous or violent. These misconceptions result in individuals facing discrimination in housing, employment, social situations, and basic civil rights protections.

People with serious mental illness are not violent. According to the National Institute for Mental Health, nearly one in five United States adults live with mental illness in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 11.5 million individuals live with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

serious mental illness, approximately 4.5% of the population.<sup>2</sup> People with mental illness are ten times more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators. People with serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or psychosis are 10 times more likely to be victims of violent crimes than the general population.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of gun violence occurs during domestic violence disputes, during felony crimes, and by gangs.

While, only about three percent of violence to others in the United States is attributed to people with mental health disabilities, many Americans believe people with mental illness pose a threat of violence. The media promotes these stereotypes through speculative reporting. These stories serve to increase stigma and results in fewer individuals seeking mental health treatment. According to a study by the New England Journal of Medicine in 2013, 66.9% of respondents were unwilling to have a person with serious mental illness as a neighbor and 71% were unwilling to have a person with serious mental illness start working closely alongside them.<sup>4</sup> In that same study, 55.9% of respondents agreed that people with serious mental illness can get well and return to productive lives with treatment.<sup>5</sup> Respondents who had experience with a family member with mental illness had more positive views of mental illness than those without.<sup>6</sup> Few media stories highlight the positive stories of recovery or individuals contributing to their communities.

Having a mental illness is not a predictor of violence. Mass shooters are unlikely to have a history of involuntary psychiatric hospitalization. Casting all mass gun violence as a mental health issue is not only not founded but distracts from efforts to address the true causes of gun violence. Gun violence and the reaction to it threaten national health, stigmatizes people recovering from mental illnesses, and retraumatizes victims of gun

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<sup>2</sup> [Id.](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/mental-health-myths-facts>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1300512>

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

violence. Mental illness does not cause violence, but acts of violence do typically cause mental illness.

In 1999, the United States Supreme Court held in that unjustified segregation of people with disabilities constitutes discrimination in violation of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act in the *Olmstead* decision.<sup>7</sup> This affirmed the ADA integration mandate to ensure that public entities ensure that people with disabilities live in the least restrictive, most integrated settings.<sup>8</sup> Today, twenty years after *Olmstead* a disproportionate number of people with mental illness are incarcerated in jails or prisons. If these individuals had access to the needed community-based services and supports, they may not have ended up in the criminal justice system.

There is consensus among professionals, consumers, family members, and the stakeholder community that a range of mental health and substance abuse services should be available to address the needs of individuals. However, throughout most of the country the community-based treatment system does not provide adequate treatment options. This leads to people ending up in crisis, and then more restrictive settings such as emergency rooms, hospitals, and jails.<sup>9</sup>

Pennsylvania fails to require and fund the specialized services that are necessary to keep people well. Services such as targeted outreach, crisis services, Intensive Case Management, Assertive Community Treatment Teams, mobile medication services, peer support services, psychiatric rehabilitation services, and adequate housing must exist in every county. As long as this lack of commitment to funding for mental health services continues, people with mental illness will not have access to the services they need to get and stay well. Now is the time to make meaningful inroads to providing critical mental health supports and services to ensure successful recovery.

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<sup>7</sup> 527 U.S. 581 (1999).

<sup>8</sup> 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(d)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.tacinc.org/media/90807/olmstead-at-twenty\\_09-04-2018.pdf](http://www.tacinc.org/media/90807/olmstead-at-twenty_09-04-2018.pdf)

In any policy debate, it is important to focus on evidence-based solutions rather than routinely blaming mental illness. As a legislative body we would ask for your support in increasing access to community based mental health services and work with the stakeholder community to end the stigma for people with mental illness.

**About our organizations:**

Disability Rights Pennsylvania is the organization designated by the Commonwealth, pursuant to federal law, to advocate for and protect the rights of individuals with disabilities, including those with mental illness. DRP works to ensure that individuals with disabilities are able to live the lives they choose, free from abuse, neglect, discrimination, and segregation.

Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania is a statewide, proactive organization seeking to promulgate the best practices and standards of excellence for achieving the ultimate goal of a just, humane, and healthy society, in which all people are accorded respect, dignity, choices, and the opportunity to achieve their full potential free from stigma and prejudice.

The Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers' Association (PMHCA) is a statewide member organization providing information, referrals and supports to people who are receiving services or in recovery from a mental illness in Pennsylvania. PMHCA promotes and supports recovery through advocacy and education with the goal of eliminating stigma and discrimination around mental health issues. PMHCA also offers referrals to resources and agencies.