

Campaign to Repeal Mental Health Laws
Policy Statement to U.S. Congress on Newtown Shootings
December 22, 2012

The Campaign to Repeal Mental Health Laws condemns the senseless mass killing of 20 children and 7 adults in Newtown, Connecticut. We are horrified and share our heartfelt concern and grief with all victims and survivors of violent acts.

As a group made up predominantly of people who have been labeled with psychiatric diagnoses, we are also concerned about the danger faced by our community should the national debate scapegoat people like ourselves, rather than working together to examine the causes of violence in American society and to promote peace.

We do not believe that good mental health policy can be made in the context of a debate about gun violence. We disagree with President Obama, who has called for keeping guns out of the hands of people labeled with mental illness,¹ and with Representative Sensenbrenner, who wants to “identify” individuals who can be labeled with mental illness.² It is exactly the wrong approach, and is out of step with national policy of non-discrimination and full inclusion of persons with disabilities, as expressed in the Americans with Disabilities Act and in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was signed by President Obama in 2009. We stand with the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network as well in rejecting discrimination against autistic people or based on any other kind of disability.

In particular, we reject the call to legislate greater scrutiny and repression of people who can be labeled with a psychiatric diagnosis, who according to the APA represent more than a quarter of the population. The system for reporting those “adjudicated as mentally ill” to the federal NCIC database needs to be dismantled, not intensified.

Many of us have experienced the violence of psychiatry first-hand: being handcuffed and taken away by police when we have done nothing violent, being tied to a stretcher in an emergency room, being kept in isolation, being drugged against our will with haloperidol and other neuroleptics, which are named as a form of torture by the United Nations,³ being deprived of our memory by electroshock “treatment,” being treated as guinea pigs in a vast uncontrolled experiment with psychiatric medications that shorten our lives and cause us to feel horrible in new ways rather than giving relief, being disbelieved when we complain about physical health problems or unwanted effects of the drugs. Some, like Esmin Green and Ellen Glick-Haley, have died as a result of these practices. Many of us started our journey through the mental health system as children and were even less able than adults to have any say in what happened to us.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/16/163050988/transcript-obama-romney-2nd-presidential-debate>.

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/us/politics/obama-to-give-congress-plan-on-gun-control-within-weeks.html>.

³ UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1986/15, paragraphs 118, 119; UN Doc. A/63/175, paragraphs 40, 47, 62-63.

We have chosen to work for the repeal of laws that allow civil commitment and imposition of coercive or nonconsensual treatment in mental health. We are inspired by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which provides that people with disabilities have an equal right as others to make decisions in our own lives, including about health care, and that disability cannot justify a deprivation of liberty.⁴ We also follow the CRPD in rejecting the insanity defense,⁵ which leaves people in a limbo of perpetual control and segregation without a clear condemnation of the wrongful behavior.

Laws that discriminate based on disability do not protect any community from violence, and have an opposite effect by intensifying a climate of fear and suspicion of those who are perceived as “different.” Intensifying collective aggression through legal means adds to the existing burden of violence.

It would be helpful to investigate the effects of psychiatric drugs, particularly SSRIs and neuroleptics, which can cause some individuals to experience serious violent impulses.⁶ At the same time, we must take care not to profile or exclude those of us who use these drugs as part of a personal program for well-being.

The national debate needs to focus on actions that reduce the climate of fear and violence as a whole, including a ban on categories of weapons that are used for mass killings and have no legitimate role in hunting or self-defense, and promoting education in ethics and mindfulness for all ages,⁷ in order to address the root causes of violence from which the intention to harm others arises.

People labeled with psychiatric disabilities have a key role to play in this national debate to make sure that it does not veer into bigotry and profiling, to offer our knowledge about extreme states and de-escalation of aggressive interactions, and to join with other victims and survivors of violence to create a peaceful world.

For more information see <http://repealmentalhealthlaws.org>.

⁴ UN Doc. A/RES/61/106, Articles 12, 14, 15, 17 and 25; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Concluding Observations on China, UN Doc. CRPD/C/CHN/CO/1, paragraph 36; and see WNUSP-ENUSP-IDA-MDAC Joint Submission to the Special Rapporteur on Torture, Annex II for additional observations by UN treaty bodies, available at <http://www.wnusp.net>.

⁵ See Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Thematic study on enhancing awareness and understanding of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN Doc. A/HRC/10/48, paragraphs 47-49; and WNUSP/CHRUSP materials on prison issues, available at <http://www.chrusp.org/home/resources>.

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-peter-breggin/medication-madness-how-ps_b_223922.html

⁷ Greenberg, M. T., Harris, A. R. Nurturing mindfulness in children and youth: current state of research. Child Development Perspectives 0:1-6. 2011. http://www10.homepage.villanova.edu/deborah.schussler/EDU_4292/Readings/Greenberg%20%20Harris%20-%20CDP%202011.pdf