



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

MARGARET MEAD

FACES Response to the Events at Virginia Tech

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Fix It

FACES is a family advocacy group based in Midlothian, Virginia that is dedicated to serve and to support families whose members are challenged by mental illness. Our members were deeply saddened by the tragedy in Blacksburg, Virginia. However, we were not surprised. Those who were may begin to understand the part played by a broken mental health system. The perpetrator of the terrifying events, who had exhibited extreme symptoms of illness, had a brief and failed encounter with the mental health system. Ultimately, he was not kept in treatment because he said he did not need it, and he did not meet the criteria for imminent danger to self or others according to Virginia law. That Virginia law has one of the nation's highest thresholds for forcible treatment. As far as we know, there was no follow up care after his short stay at the treatment facility.

We, the members of **FACES**, the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, spouses, and friends know up close and personal the failings of a mental health system that is many times incapable of averting crisis and providing timely, compassionate treatment. Why is our mental health system continually failing when concerned and caring mental health personnel and the upper echelons of government, from the President of the United States, to governors, congressmen, and law enforcement, agree that the SYSTEM IS BROKEN?

We the families live that brokenness. At our support group, come listen to the heart wrenching stories of family members as they fight a system that responds to crisis with laws that defy common sense and a scientific understanding of mental illness. Hear the frightened mother who fears for her psychotic son's inability to care for himself. Hear her desperation for his safety because he doesn't meet the criteria for admittance to a hospital, and even if he did, there are NO BEDS available for him. Listen to the distraught father who visits his son in jail — the place that now has become the new mental health treatment center. Imagine that a family member of yours has cancer and must go to prison for treatment. Cry with the brother whose sister killed herself because, when she became depressed and sought help, she was told to wait weeks before she could get assistance. Too late, too cruel, too typical are ineffective and sometime

tragic responses to those suffering from difficult mental illnesses and to their families who suffer with them.

We, who have lived this nightmare of inadequate care, know what needs to be done to fix this broken system.

1. Fight the stigma. Bring openness and scientific understanding to the physical causes of the all too common brain disorders that comprise mental illnesses.
2. Stop hiding in shame and blame. One in four American families has a loved one with a serious brain disorder. Education is always our most powerful tool against fear and ignorance and leads to talk of treatment and recovery.
3. Fund best practice out patient and in patient treatment. Make funding of these programs a priority. Know that the illnesses are on a continuum of severity, and one remedy does not fit all.
4. Fund the good programs that now exist. There are many programs that have to beg for funds each year to continue even when they have shown they work.
5. Respond to crisis. Sufferers of mental illness need help that is immediate and not hindered by well meaning but ineffective laws.
6. Change the laws that have proved to hinder care. Many of the civil commitment laws were well intended but have proved to be injurious to the wellbeing of those they sought to help. Virginia, along with four other states, has the strictest commitment laws. Someone must be in the process of harming themselves or another (imminent danger) before treatment can be mandated. This high threshold for treatment defies common sense. It provides no safety net for the individual suffering from mental illness and the no safety net for the society at large.
7. Understand that jail is not a treatment. Keep the mentally ill out of jail with special police training and mental health courts that divert people from the judicial system to where they belong — the mental health care system.
8. Know that recovery is possible. Many people recover from mental illness and benefit from peer support and improved medications. Give sufferers of mental illness a true chance to become healthy and functioning members of our society.

The events at Virginia Tech have magnified the flaws of a mental health system that is broken. But while we mourn the tragedy and feel for what was lost, we continue to hope that it brings to the national consciousness an awareness of the problems that the mental health community deals with on a day-to-day basis.

The stigma and ignorance surrounding mental illness, the lack of funds for treatment in short and long term facilities, the poor crisis response, the ineffectual laws, and the criminalization of the mentally ill, add to the frustration of the families of loved ones who are suffering each day from these conditions.

The simple truth is that we, if we want to be a just, humane society, have no other alternative but to find viable solutions to this mental health catastrophe and FIX IT. If we do not fix it, the consequences may continue to be too terrible to bear.