Tell Congress to Act on Important Mental Health Legislation!

This week’s tragic shootings of government workers at the Washington Navy Yard has shocked the nation and renewed efforts in Congress to pass comprehensive legislation to increase mental health prevention and early intervention services in our nation’s schools and communities.

A bipartisan group of Senators, lead by Sens. Mark Begich (D-AK) and Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.), has called on Senate’s leadership to bring to a vote the Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act (S.689), which was passed by Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions earlier this year in response to the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. This bipartisan legislation, sponsored by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Lamar Alexander (R-TN), received near unanimous approval (95-to-2) as an amendment to Senate gun violence legislation, which subsequently stalled when a firearm background check amendment was defeated.

The senators are calling on Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) and Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) to work together to bring S. 689 to the Senate floor as separate legislation so that it can be “voted on and passed immediately.”

The Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act seeks to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to authorize and improve programs administered by the Departments of Education and HHS to promote awareness, prevention and early identification of mental health conditions. Specific provisions would:

- Reauthorize the Mental Health First Aid Training Grants program and expand its use to include training to recognize the symptoms of mental illness and availability of appropriate community services;
- Authorize assistance to school districts for in-service training of school personnel on techniques and supports needed for early identification of children with trauma histories or at risk of mental illness;
- Authorize use of Sec. 4121 grants to support school-based mental health partnerships with mental health, child welfare or other community-based agencies to provide programs of mental health services and referrals for early identification and treatment of social, emotional or behavioral problems;
- Reauthorize and restore funding for the Youth Suicide Early Intervention and Prevention Strategies state grant program, Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Services on Campuses grant program and the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative; and
- Authorize education agencies to use Title I funds to implement school-wide mental health programs to improve and support comprehensive positive behavioral interventions and support programs.

The American Art Therapy Association strongly supports this legislation and has been working with its national partner organizations for nearly a year to urge Congressional action on S. 689 and related legislation to increase access to mental health services for k-12 schools, veterans, military personnel and their families and others.

WE NEED YOUR HELP – Contact your Senators and Representative to Urge them to vote YES on the Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act (S.689) to expand access to mental health services in our schools and communities.
WHAT YOU NEED TO DO:

- Mail, email or fax a version of the accompanying sample letters to your Senators and House Members. (Senators contact information can be found at http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm; You can identify House Members by zip codes at http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/).
- Insert a statement identifying yourself as a constituent (either where you live, work, or both) and any professional information that explains your interest in, and knowledge of the issues addressed by the legislation.
- Make sure to include your contact information (both mailing and email addresses).
- Let us know what legislators you have contacted by sending a note to publicpolicy@arttherapy.org.

SAMPLE LETTER – Requesting Senators and Members of Congress to Support Passage of the Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act (S.689).

The Honorable {Senator's Full Name}  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator {Last Name}:

I am writing to urge your support for the Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act (S.689) which provides urgently needed funding to increase mental health prevention and early intervention services in our nation’s schools and communities. Recent mass shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, and the Washington Navy Yard by young men with histories of mental health disorders illustrate the urgent need to broaden our nation’s commitment to providing timely access to mental health services in our schools and communities.

As an art therapist practicing in {your City, or your School District or organization and location}, I am well aware of the needs of school-aged children who are academically and socially at risk due to a variety of cognitive and emotional issues. Art Therapists are mental health professionals who provide and support school-based intervention services that address barriers to educational success, ensure positive conditions for learning, and help all students achieve academically and ultimately become productive learners.

The Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act would amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to authorize and improve programs administered by the Departments of Education and Health, Education and Welfare to promote awareness, prevention and early identification of mental health conditions. In particular, it reauthorizes the Mental Health First Aid Training Grants program to provide training for school personnel to recognize the symptoms of mental illness, and provides Section 4121 grant funding to support school-based mental health partnership with mental health, child welfare or other community-based agencies to provide comprehensive programs of mental health services and referrals for early identification and treatment of social, emotional or behavioral issues.

More mental health professionals including art therapists are urgently needed in schools and the greater community to help address the on-going violence we experience in our schools, neighborhoods and even our Nation’s Capital. S. 689 is bipartisan legislation with strong support among the mental health and education communities. I urge you to vote YES on this timely and much needed legislation.

Sincerely,

MAKE SURE TO INCLUDE YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION {Mailing & email addresses}.  
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