



## **Statement on Department of Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas’ Concerning Comments about People with Mental Health Disabilities in Interview with *The 74***

Recent mass shootings in our country have prompted a number of proposed policy solutions. Unfortunately, some proposals link people with mental health disabilities with gun violence in ways that are unsupported by facts, and that are stigmatizing. Although public safety is paramount, proposals that assume that people with mental health disabilities are inherently dangerous, and that targeting them will solve our country’s gun violence problem, are the wrong way to go.

In a recent [interview](#) with *The 74*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Mayorkas indicated a belief that some people with mental health disabilities present a serious risk of committing a mass school shooting. Specifically, in response to a question about people who might present a serious risk of committing a mass school shooting, Secretary Mayorkas said, “We’re seeing individuals potentially with mental health problems, grievances, and they have manifested their challenges outwardly, they have spoken about violence.”

The evidence does not support Secretary Mayorkas’ statement. In fact, what we know about people with disabilities and gun violence suggests just the opposite. Studies have repeatedly shown that people with disabilities, including mental health disabilities, are far more likely to be victims of gun violence than perpetrators. In fact, studies demonstrate that only 4% of gun violence is connected to mental health disabilities.<sup>1</sup> The American Psychological Association, among others, has opined that whether someone has a mental health disability is not an accurate predictor of violence, and should not be treated as such. Falsely blaming people with mental health disabilities for violence will stigmatize these individuals, and violate their right to privacy. This will likely dissuade some people from seeking help at all.

Additionally, current proposals for programs that label children with disabilities—even those at very young ages-- as “threats” only serve to further isolate, stigmatize, and remove them from needed supportive services and welcoming, inclusive environments. This is neither helpful nor effective at increasing safety or reducing gun violence, and will ultimately harm children, youth, and adults with mental health disabilities, along with the broader disability community.

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<sup>1</sup> Metz, Johnathan M., “Mental Illness, Mass Shootings, and the Politics of American Firearms,” 105(2) *Am. J. Pub. Health* 240-249 (2015) available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4318286>

**We reject policy proposals that scapegoat people with mental health disabilities for the increasing incidences of mass shootings and acts of mass violence in this country.**

We urge Secretary Mayorkas to retract this unsubstantiated suggestion that people with mental health disabilities pose a serious risk of committing a mass school shooting. We also urge Secretary Mayorkas to take an evidence-based approach to developing effective and necessary policy approaches to keeping all students safe. We request a meeting with the Secretary to discuss these issues; in the meantime, we welcome the opportunity to provide the Department with examples of positive approaches to supporting student behavior and improving school climate, to help make schools safer for all students.

Sincerely,

American Association of People with Disabilities

Autism National Committee

Autistic Self Advocacy Network

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law

Center for Learner Equity

Children's Mental Health Network

Connecticut Legal Rights Project, Inc.

Connecticut SEPTO Alliance

Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA)

Japanese American Citizens League

Keep The Promise Coalition

Mental Health CT

NAMI Connecticut

National Association for Rights Protection and Advocacy

National Center for Learning Disabilities

National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)

National Down Syndrome Congress

PATH CT

The Arc of the United States

The Honorable Tony Coelho

**The Coalition for Smart Safety includes disability rights, civil rights, education, and privacy organizations working together to stop the false association of gun violence with psychiatric disability.**