

John Henry Smith:

For Connecticut public radio, I'm John Henry Smith. Once again, politicians are offering thoughts and prayers to victims of a mass shooting and their loved ones. This latest mass shooting in Boulder, Colorado has claimed 10 lives. Our next guest indicates any attempt to say this is a mental illness problem is wrong-headed. She is Kathy Flaherty, Executive Director of the Connecticut Legal Rights Project. Her organization provides legal services to low income persons with psychiatric disability, statewide. Kathy, what effect has the tendency to blame mass shootings on mental illness done to folks here in Connecticut who are indeed clinically mentally ill?

Kathy Flaherty:

Because, I am a person who lives in recovery from a mental health diagnosis. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder back when I was in law school. Whenever a new mass shooting event occurs, you're basically waiting for the other shoe to drop. Sooner or later, the blame gets placed on mental illness, rather than looking at bigger systemic issues. And, I understand in one way why that happens because most of us, we really just can't comprehend what it would take for a person to get to the point where they would do something like this. My perspective is, though, is it really is very rarely related to a diagnosed mental health condition, and often a result of many other things, including a perspective of white male supremacy, racism, misogyny, a whole lot of very toxic stuff mixed together, that results in rage and people taking that rage out with a weapon.

John Henry Smith:

You say you tend to blame things like this on racism, white male misogyny and such. Tell me more about that point of view.

Kathy Flaherty:

Well, I think if you actually look at the research, people always flee to the easy solution of, the person must be crazy, because only a crazy person would do something like that. But when the researchers dig into the data, it's maybe 4% of these issues, and we're talking only about the mass shootings. I think the biggest problem we have is when we talk about gun violence, is we don't talk about the everyday gun violence and also suicides, because most completed suicides or a grand number of completed suicides are accomplished with the use of a firearm.

John Henry Smith:

Well, Kathy, in this state, of course, Sandy Hook was our most infamous mass shooting. How would you evaluate the legislative response in the years that have followed, particularly in regards to making sure that folks with psychiatric disabilities aren't scapegoated for gun violence?

Kathy Flaherty:

It's been a challenge. I will say that. I, along with 15 other people, served on Governor Malloy's Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, and we spent a great bit of time writing up a report with recommendations about what we thought this state needed to see, especially not just in terms of the school buildings, school climate, guns, but also mental health, and mental health for the sake of improving the mental

health system, not merely as a means to address gun violence. And, I think the thing that's been frustrating for me in doing this advocacy for so many years is a lot of our report was stuff that had been written before. This state has had five or six task forces over the decades looking at mental health, and pretty much all of them make the same recommendations all the time, which is that you really need an adequately resourced community-based system of care that is based on voluntary services and supports so that people can live in the community. You know, have affordable housing for people, increase opportunities to education and employment, because frankly, people with mental health conditions want the same thing that everybody else does.

But when it comes to events like this, too often, the solution is, well, if we could only lock up in air quotes, the crazy people, we wouldn't have these problems. And unfortunately, you could lock all of us up, which would be a lot of people, because they always say the stats are one in four or one in five, but even if you did, you're still not going to prevent a lot of the violence that is taking place. So, I think in terms of the legislature, I think the interest is there. People want to do the right things, but a lot of it comes down to money.

John Henry Smith:

Sure. It makes the world go round, they say. What do you think of red flag laws that empower courts to take firearms away from those deemed a threat to themselves or to others, or similar laws? What do you think of those?

Kathy Flaherty:

Well, I think the extreme risk protection order laws, which I try to call them instead of the red flag laws for (I don't know why) but they actually accomplish what their goal is, which is to take firearms away from someone who presents an imminent risk of danger to self or others. They have been found to be successful at preventing suicides, which is great. And so, the thing that's really good about them is that they require a presentation to a court and meeting a legal standard. So, it's not just based on an assumption that because somebody has X diagnosis or Y diagnosis, or maybe they can't manage their money, so they shouldn't be allowed to have a gun. It's somebody who has done something, has exhibited some pattern or conduct of behavior that leads people to think that there is that immediate risk, so we have to do something and we address it. And then of course, they have the opportunity to come back later when the crisis situation has resolved to try to get their gun rights restored.

John Henry Smith:

Finally, in the wake of Sandy Hook, in particular, and of course, more recent incidents, do you think enough attention gets paid to the mental health of those who suffer from gun violence, both victims and survivors?

Kathy Flaherty:

No. I think that is another big part of the conversation that's missing. We don't have enough conversation about the trauma of living in communities that are affected by sort of the everyday gun violence, and we don't have enough conversations about the survivors and are they getting the services

and support they need to continue on in the world after suffering a tremendous loss, whether it's somebody who has acquired a disability as a result of a gun violence incident, because they've survived it, or family members who have lost somebody to gun violence. Those are the conversations we really need to have, and they're more complicated. They're more difficult. It's a lot easier for people to deflect from having substantive conversations about real things when they can very easily pawn everything off by saying, "Oh, it's a mental health problem."

John Henry Smith:

What would you want Connecticut residents hearing this, who want to do something about that, who want more mental health, who want more attention paid to the mental health of survivors, what should they do? When they write their legislators, what should they say?

Kathy Flaherty:

Well, I think one of the things people have to understand is that a lot of the services and supports that survivors and really anybody with a mental health condition rely on, are funded through state dollars. So, if the state budget is going to pay for things that people in the state value, people need to let their legislators know that they understand that that requires revenue, because the state can't print money the way the federal government can, which means taxes, and people don't always see that direct connection. But when you talk about the services that a state offers to its residents, those have to be paid for, and we have to acknowledge that the budget is a statement of what we value, and act accordingly. I know that there are lots of advocacy organizations; there's Connecticut against Gun Violence. There's Moms Demand, there's Every Town. There's mental health organizations like NAMI Connecticut, like the Keep the Promise Coalition, that advocate for the systems to be improved. And, I'm very easy to find. People can reach out to me anytime. I'm happy to have this conversation with them.

John Henry Smith:

Kathy Flaherty, Executive Director of the Connecticut Legal Rights Project. Thank you so much for your time.

Kathy Flaherty:

Thank you.