



# Obama calls for end to mental illness stigma

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WASHINGTON (AP) - President Barack Obama said Monday that he wants to end the stigma of mental illness and enrolled the star power of actors Bradley Cooper and Glenn Close at a White House conference organized in response to the December shootings at a Connecticut elementary school.

The event was designed to encourage those struggling with mental illness to seek treatment, although some attendees noted the government needs to provide more resources to meet that goal.

Despite its origins, there was a notable lack of discussion of gun violence at the conference. The president never mentioned the matter as he opened the gathering from the East Room, instead stressing that he wants to make it clear that the majority of the mentally ill are not violent. He said his main goal in hosting the conference is "bringing mental illness out of the shadows" and encouraging those suffering to get help, particularly veterans and young people.

"We whisper about mental health issues and avoid asking too many questions," the president said. "The brain is a body part, too. We just know less about it. And there should be no shame in discussing or seeking help for treatable illnesses that affect too many people that we love. We've got to get rid of that embarrassment. We've got to get rid of that stigma."

The conference comes after Obama's effort to pass gun control, including more background checks for purchases and a ban on assault weapon sales, was voted down in the Senate. The need to improve the country's mental health care system is something all sides of the gun debate, including the National Rifle Association, have advocated.

"It's really something that uniquely can bring our country together, whether the issue is health care, gun control, media violence, however they want to characterize it," said Gordon Smith, a former Republican senator from Oregon whose son, Garrett, suffered from depression and committed suicide in 1998 a few days after his 13th birthday. Smith now heads the National Association of Broadcasters, which announced as part of the conference a new campaign to reduce negative perceptions of mental illness through television and radio ads and social media.

Smith's passing mention of guns, during a panel discussion, was the only mention of the issue in the daylong convention that came out of Obama's executive orders following the shooting at Connecticut's Sandy Hook Elementary School.

There's been little publicly disclosed about the mental health of Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza, although it's been documented that other gunmen involved in mass shootings suffered from mental illness. Federal law bans certain mentally ill people from purchasing firearms, but the background check system is woefully incomplete and Obama is trying to get more mental health records included.

The conference featured around 150 invited attendees including mental health advocates and patients, educators, health care providers, faith leaders, lawmakers and local government officials from across the country. The two celebrities seemed impressed to be at the White House, with Close snapping a photo of Obama on her iPhone and Cooper gushing, "Wow," as he began to speak as part of the closing remarks with Vice President Biden.

Cooper has been promoting mental health awareness since his Oscar-nominated leading role as a man with bipolar disorder in last year's "Silver Linings Playbook."

"I'm sort of here by accident. It's not that I didn't know about mental illness. I think it's just that I just didn't see it as a part of my life," Cooper said. But he said since his performance, he learned people around him have been suffering in silence, including a close friend who is bipolar. "I want to be part of the solution," he said to applause.

Close's experience is more personal. Her sister, Jessie, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at 51 and Jessie's son, Calen, spent two years in a psychiatric hospital with schizoaffective disorder. In 2009, Close's family battles led her to help start a non-profit called Bring Change 2 Mind, which produces public service announcements to fight the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness.

"The truth is the stigma has hardly budged," Close said during a panel discussion on how to address negative attitudes moderated by Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. Close referred to studies showing the public doesn't want to have those with mental illness as neighbors, supervising them at work or taking care of their children and believe they are violent.

The conference comes after public spending on mental health services has been slashed across the country in recent years, driven by the recession and in some cases a zeal to shrink government. That has led to the closure and cutbacks at state-run psychiatric hospitals and cuts to services for the poor and people in the criminal justice system.

But the trend may be turning around in the wake of last year's mass shootings at Sandy Hook

and the movie theater in Aurora, Colo. There are moves to restore funding in several states, and Obama pointed out that his signature health care law includes improvements for mental health coverage, including a ban beginning next year against denying coverage to those who are mentally ill.

Wayne Lindstrom, president and CEO of nonprofit Mental Health America, rose from the audience during a Q-and-A session of Sebelius' panel to express concerns about cuts in public services coinciding with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

"We will have millions of more Americans with coverage, potentially increasing the demand at a time when we are still far under capacity," Lindstrom said, appealing to members of Congress present to increase funding. "Unless we have additional resources we will not have the kind of access that we're all advocating for here today."

There were other concerns expressed by attendees - Lindstrom pressed for rules being developed by the Obama administration to end insurance discrimination against people with mental illness and drug and alcohol addictions. Former Democratic Rep. Patrick Kennedy of Rhode Island, who had high-profile struggles with substance abuse and mental health while in office, pressed Sebelius to require insurance companies to publicly disclose data about their mental health coverage.

"Insurance companies will make all of us do the runaround unless they know that someone's looking at them," Kennedy said in an impassioned appeal from his seat in the audience that was met by loud applause from attendees.

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., added that until community mental health and substance abuse are funded like other medical problems, the stigma can't be eliminated. "If we don't have services, we're not going to get this done," she said, standing from her front-row seat, among more than a dozen other members of Congress who have fought for mental health funding.

Sebelius said she hopes the conference will help raise awareness of funding gaps so that there will be more public pressure on lawmakers to fill them. As for the mental health parity rules, she said she's aware there are a lot of unanswered questions and she's committed to finalizing them by the end of the year.

Biden cited HHS figures that the country needs 8,000 more mental health professionals. "Think of the irony here if through your great efforts, we encourage people to come forward and they find out there's no one there to help them or they have to wait a long time," he said.

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