

Tell your legislators it's a mental health issue

By Michelle Mann Sun Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, September 2, 2015 11:22 am

It was a day that two people who report the news became the news.

Two journalists from Virginia television station WDBJ-TV were killed by a gunman who later killed himself.

Alison Parker and her cameraman, Adam Ward, were shot while reporting on a chamber of commerce story. You've got to be kidding was my first reaction.

The gunman, Vester Flanagan, a 41-year-old former reporter who went by the on-air name Bryce Williams, had no known criminal history.

ABC News reported receiving a 23-page fax that morning from someone claiming to be Williams. "I've been a human powder keg for a while," it said in part, "just waiting to go boom."

Shock. Horror. Oh no, not again.

Then the "Monday morning quarterbacking" began. Most of the dialogue involved "tightening" gun laws.

I do not own a gun, never have fired one and don't plan to any time soon. That being said, I will say that I don't think this—or any of the other senseless murders that seem to be happening with increasing regularity—was a gun control issue.

I think it is more a mental health issue and that is the thing that should make us in Alabama pause for thought as the state legislature continues to wrangle with the issue of balancing a budget.

Alabama legislators are proposing to eliminate \$35.2 million in state funds from the mental health budget. The cut would result in a loss of \$64 million in matching federal funds, which would make the loss to mental health more like \$99 million, according to Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley's office.

In May, a legislative rally was held at the Vivian B. Adams School in Ozark. The school serves people in Coffee, Dale, Geneva, Henry, Houston and Pike Counties. The purpose of the forum was to make state legislators aware of the collective needs of the mental health/intellectual disabilities communities in those counties.

It was a standing room only crowd in the Vivian B. Adams School cafeteria. State Rep. Steve Clouse was the only state legislator who showed up.

The Region 4 Legislative Rally in the Wiregrass was one of eight held May 11 throughout the state to heighten awareness of the current budget crises in the state's general fund and the impact to the Department of Mental Health as the threatened severe cuts are enacted.

Nearly 6,000 people are receiving special needs services in the state of Alabama. There are over 3,000 on



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waiting lists and 300 people are added to services annually. More than 600 people are graduating from schools and are also going on the waiting lists for special needs services.

“We must be the voice for those without a voice,” said Joe. W. Adams, longtime VBAS board member and supporter.

Susan Owens agreed. Owens is the VBAS Resource Coordinator. She is the mother of Ryan, who has received day rehabilitation services at VBAS since he was 8 years old. He is now 32.

“I speak for our child who has no voice. I speak for the most fragile of our citizens,” Owens said.

“I speak for those we are morally obligated to care for.”

Vaughan Blumberg Executive Director Ed Dorsey reiterated that people need to contact their legislators in support of mental health funding. “Fifty years ago, family members were extremely active in getting assistance for their sons or daughters. What we’re seeing now is that legislators are not hearing from parents and family members and they need to.”

According to Dorsey, a total of 5,800 residents in Alabama receive help through mental health programs in the state. More than 3,000 are on a waiting list. About 300 are added to services annually, Dorsey said. The mental health budget has been about \$104 million annually for the last several years since losing more than a third of its budget between 2009 and 2012.

“If we don’t make noise, they are not going to listen,” Dorsey added. “Bring that noise to Montgomery. Legislators are listening but they are not hearing enough from our families.”

Cutting mental health funding by more than \$35 million in Alabama would not just mean fewer services and staff for residents with mental health needs throughout the state, VBAS Director Hannah Parker said.

Also at the VBAS legislative rally in May was Dan Zapata, development disabilities director at the East Central Mental Health Center in Troy. “Mental health funding is something we can’t just repair – it has got to be fixed,” he said.

James Tucker, director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Programs, has said that without at least level funding, the state will be unable to care for the 12,000 people relying on its services. Mental health programs have been slashed by almost \$40 million in just over the last five years, he said.

“This is a priority issue. This is an issue that demands addressing and not just at level funding,” Owens said. “It is time to address the needs of the over 3,000 deserving individuals in this state who are on the waiting list for services, many who have been waiting more than 10 years.”

“We have marketed ourselves as, ‘Alabama the Beautiful’ and ‘Sweet Home Alabama,’” Owens added. “Let’s work hard to and let’s work together, not to let our tag line become ‘Alabama, you don’t want to move here.’”

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