

# Community must be vigilant, comprehensive with help for troubled teens

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Teachers are responding to President Donald Trump's suggestion that arming teachers would prevent more school shootings and are using the hashtag #ArmMeWith to demand better school supplies and mental health resources, not guns. Time

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With the recent tragedy of another high school shooting — this one at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School — attention has again focused on the increased need for children's mental health services.



While early intervention programs have been shown to have a largely positive effect on young children dealing with emotional and behavioral difficulties, many of those services drop off as kids move into middle grade and high school, leaving them vulnerable to unhealthy and dangerous behaviors as they try to deal with their harrowing emotions on their own. In fact, according to the New York State's Council of School

Superintendents' October 2017 survey, 52 percent of superintendents identified increasing mental health-related services for students as a funding priority, that is up 17 points from 35 percent in 2016. Of the top three funding priorities, beyond what's needed to maintain current services and mandates, increasing mental health-related services was cited as No. 1 among superintendents statewide.

Because numerous counseling programs for older kids rely on limited government funding, there aren't enough of the services for the kids that need them. Additionally, older kids who participate in the programs often are stigmatized as odd or outsiders, making them avoid therapy, even when it's available.

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But the need for the therapy remains. Often, the kids don't relate well to others, form healthy relationships or trust people, which can contribute to serious and dangerous behavior. Trauma leaves victimized kids feeling disconnected, isolated and 'out there', by themselves. Bullying from peers adds to feelings of separation and can lead to despondency, depression and suicide.

A flexible, wrap-around approach that has the actionable and financial support of local communities and governments is needed to help identify, treat and connect with children who have behavioral health problems and/or suffer from trauma. The ready availability of home- and school-based programs that provide therapeutic programs for struggling families are essential, as are youth programs with peers that have been through similar situations. Families need access to services that meet the needs of their developing adolescents, and when parents can't support or care for their children, communities need to take responsibility for the treatment, health care and education that troubled kids need to become successful adults. Schools need on-site therapists and counselors; communities need centers with trained staff and programs specifically for older kids. Suicidal kids need to be quickly evaluated and crisis response needs to be available 24/7 to avoid tragedies.

Trish Luchnick of Verbank knows the power of wrap-around help. After her daughter required a full-body brace to recover from a back injury during middle school, she couldn't participate in school and other activities, leaving her feeling disconnected from friends, detached and withdrawn. For years she struggled with depression, substance abuse and became involved in an abusive relationship. School and private counseling, plus medication and a move to an alternative school helped stabilize her. She made friends. Her grades improved.

But during college, she became increasingly depressed, self-medicated with alcohol and had frequent suicide attempts. She was hospitalized for psychiatric care, medicated, counseled and joined Alcoholics Anonymous. She improved and moved into supportive housing, then went back to work. Now, 10 years in recovery and married with a young son, she is, "...the most effervescent, creative, wonderful person you would ever meet," said Luchnick, director of Astor Services for Children & Families' Family Driven Care. "If you met her, you would have no idea that she has overcome so much adversity."

Ask her what turned her around, and her daughter will say that her family never gave up on her, said Luchnick.

"We are so grateful we were able to navigate the system," said Luchnick. "We are so aware that she's the exception, not the rule."

"It was a constant struggle to find the right help at the right time," said Luchnick. "Even good help isn't helpful if it's not at the right time."

*James McGuirk is the executive director and chief executive officer of Astor Services for Children & Families in Rhinebeck and the Bronx.*