



American
Public Health
Association

PROTECT, PREVENT, LIVE WELL

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December 20, 2012

The President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

In wake of the heartbreaking and senseless tragedy that took the lives of innocent children and adults in Newtown, Conn., I write on behalf of the American Public Health Association in support of your leadership in developing a comprehensive public health approach to reducing gun violence in our nation. As you have stated in your public comments in recent days, these tragedies must end and we, as a nation, must change. We welcome your announcement that Vice President Biden will lead the administration's inter-agency working group tasked with developing recommendations to reduce gun violence and we urge you to include strong public health representation in these discussions. We stand ready to work with you, the vice president and Congress to pass legislation to protect our nation's children and their families from the growing epidemic of gun violence.

Gun violence is one of the leading causes of preventable death in our country and we must take a comprehensive public health approach to addressing this growing crisis. For too long we as a nation have failed to take on this devastating problem in our communities and we can wait no longer.

APHA believes there are several immediate steps that can be taken to reduce gun violence in the United States. We thank you for announcing your support for legislation to reinstate the federal ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, which expired in 2004. These firearms are not suitable for hunting, collecting or self-defense, – but are meant for military combat and have no place on our streets or in our homes. We also urge the adoption of legislation to close the so-called “gun show loophole,” which exempts unlicensed private sellers of firearms from conducting criminal background checks on buyers at gun shows. This significant gap in federal law provides access to weapons for felons, the mentally ill and others prohibited from owning firearms. We must also expand the collection and analysis of data related to gun violence and other violent deaths in order to better understand the causes. In addition we must ensure that our state and local health departments have the resources they need to develop and implement appropriate interventions in their states and communities.

In addition to common sense gun control measures, we urge you to work with Congress to ensure adequate funding for critical mental health services. Like most public health funding at the state level, funding mental health services has been on the decline in recent years. At the same time, funding for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has been proposed for cuts. We urge you to ensure that state, local and community-based behavioral health systems have the resources they need to provide much-needed care. While the expansion of Medicaid coverage will provide mental health benefits to millions of currently uninsured

Americans, gaps will likely still exist since several states have signaled they do not plan to expand this coverage. We also urge you to ensure that the Affordable Care Act provides comprehensive coverage for mental health and substance abuse disorder services as part of the Essential Health Benefits.

We join you in expressing our deepest sympathies to the families of the victims and the entire community of Newtown and pledge our support to work with your administration and leaders in Congress to pass legislation to better protect all of our nation's children, families and communities from senseless acts of violence and to ensure that all Americans have access to the critical mental health services they need.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Georges C. Benjamin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Georges C. Benjamin, MD, FACP, FACEP (E)
Executive Director

Cc: The Honorable John Boehner
The Honorable Harry Reid
The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
The Honorable Mitch McConnell