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Before the Federal Commission on School Safety:

“The Ecology of Schools: Fostering a Culture of Human Flourishing and Developing Character”

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To the Commission, thank you all for convening this meeting and working to protect our students’ safety and improve their learning outcomes. Thank you also for inviting me to speak on the increasing threat of mass murder in our schools. I will highlight four underlying drivers of school shootings that if addressed, together constitute an effective prevention and possible eradication of school shootings: early detection of the homicidal and suicidal ideation of school shooters; successful school threat assessment and intervention; access to weapons for school shooters; and reduction of media contagion. The last contributor to school shootings, media contagion, is where I will begin and focus most of my comments.

Media Contagion

For those still questioning whether school shootings are contagious, consider this: Los Angeles County Unified School District’s Threat Assessment Response Team usually receives about 20 calls per week in their very large school district, and many are not credible. However, in the week following the Parkland, FL shooting, the team had to evaluate 63 threats

(<http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-school-shooting-prevention-program-20180227-story.html>). How do students as far away as Los Angeles hear about a school shooting in

Florida? The answer is obvious: mass media, and to a lesser degree, social media. Also consider that whereas the U.S. had only one or two mass shootings per year in the fifty years prior to 2000 (from <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/09/us/they-threaten-seethe-and-unhinge-then-kill-in-quantity.html?pagewanted=all>), by 2003, the average was seven per year; 2012, 15 per year; 2016, 20 per year, and in 2017 we had a whopping 30 incidents and double the fatalities of the prior year (<https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/active-shooter-incidents-2000-2017.pdf/view>).

We now have eleven studies of the contagion effect of mass homicides, one as far back as 1971, but most research is from the last decade or two. All eleven found a contagion effect, including a few outside the United States, and most were able to directly connect the effect to media coverage. The critical time period during which mass shootings are most contagious was also very consistent across the eleven studies: new incidents are incited within two weeks of news coverage (Gould & Olivares, 2017; Johnston & Joy, 2016). Single homicide, often motivated by very different reasons (familial, crime, drug, or gang-related) is not increasing and is not contagious. Without the new news media as a carrier, mass homicide would have remained an obscure back shelf disease that almost no one had heard of and no one was scared of.

An important consideration is not just that the shootings are contagious, but how strong is the contagion? For mass media, it is estimated to be 22% per incident, but for every 4 school shootings, a 5th is guaranteed within 13 days, so there is escalating impact from multiple shootings clustering together (Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015). For social media, it is estimated at 50% for the first 8 days and 85% within 19 days. When

tweets in a region remain steadily discussing a school shooting (all it takes is 10 or more per million), more shootings happen in that region (Garcia-Bernardo, et al., 2015).

Why is it contagious? This is where the research is focusing now. We know it is; that is no longer in question. But why? We have very good ideas, most of them based on the shooters' own statements, writing, and profiles. Experiments need to test these variables and determine which are the most telling. The recent release of funding for the "Comprehensive School Safety Initiative" and the "Investigator-Initiated Research and Evaluation on Firearms Violence" will help us answer the "why" question, so Secretary Azar and Secretary Nielsen, thank you for supporting that funding. The last significant analyses of school shooters, identifying their motives and their cross-cutting traits, were conducted 14 years ago (Fein, et al., 2004; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). It is time to fund updates to those studies, as Dr. Reddy-Randazzo mentioned in her remarks to this commission on June 6, 2018. It is possible that characteristics and motives of shooters have changed since then. However, we do have other qualitative and quantitative assessments conducted by non-FBI researchers, based on shooters' writings and publicly available documents over the last decade, along with some interviews with mass shooters by Meloy and his team, paint a fairly comprehensive picture of what is typically motivating this group (Fox & Levin, 2015; Lankford, 2013; Lankford, 2016; Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2012; Meloy, Mohandie, Knoll, & Hoffmann, 2015).

Prevention Hot Buttons

I address these comments primarily to Secretary Azar and Secretary DeVos, whose departments deal directly with violence prevention in schools, and public health in general. What we know is

that mass shooters may differ in some traits, yet three key things stand out about them: the majority are depressed to the point of being suicidal; the majority are socially isolated or have suffered recent losses of social standing or social connection; and, most believe fame or notoriety will be the remedy for their perceived unjust treatment or circumstances (also described as a narcissistic tendency) (Johnston & Joy, 2016). Is this enough of a profile to round up would-be shooters and put an end to the carnage? No, probably not. However, these three shared traits: suicidality, social isolation/loss, and desire for fame, are intervention hot buttons. If we press directly on them, like a major artery, we can slow the loss of blood, so to speak. Again, I will start by addressing the last trait, desire for fame, since it applies to media contagion most.

Fame-seeking

In mental health intervention we are taught a memorable adage: suicide and homicide are two sides of the same coin. It can flip in one moment, from one side to the other. We have methods in place to intervene in suicidal ideation, and though we may not be able to keep people from ever feeling suicidal, we can remove the bad seed that has been planted which encourages people to find meaning in their suicide through infamy. The Department of Health and Human Services has done excellent work in suicide prevention, especially reducing suicide contagion. I encourage you to continue those efforts and reissue the policy recommendation from the CDC to the media, regarding reporting and coverage of suicide (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994). Just in the last couple of years, the media has resorted to reporting more details of celebrity suicide almost immediately after the deaths, a practice they voluntarily abandoned over 20 years ago. We need to remind them of the copious evidence regarding how contagious suicide is, and how successful their efforts were in reducing suicide in many countries, simply by not releasing details for a

number of weeks, using restraint, and limiting reporting to one small mention, rather than front page news (Gould, Greenberg, Velting, & Shaffer, 2003; Phillips, 1979; 1980; Pirkis, 2012; Stack, 2000; 2003). Their irresponsible over-focus on two celebrity suicides last week will likely result in unnecessary deaths this week and next.

And, furthermore, I would like to ask you, Secretary Azar, to convene a working group through the CDC to evaluate the research on media contagion regarding mass shootings, and make recommendations to the media, as was done in 1994 on suicide contagion. I have argued that of all the interventions to reduce mass shootings, voluntary policy adoption of Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them by the media is the fastest and least expensive way to make an impact. My colleagues in journalism and communications have been working, newspaper by newspaper, station by station, presenting the media contagion research, as well as presenting at large conferences for journalists, news directors and producers, to encourage them to adopt Don't Name Them and No Notoriety. However, to date, only a handful have made the commitment: Anderson Cooper stands out, refusing to name or show shooters for five years; Megyn Kelly; and more recently, Ben Shapiro of the Daily Wire. For nationwide adoption, we need your help. Journalists' code of ethics requires them to use "heightened sensitivity" when it comes to crime victims and their families, but more importantly, balance the "need for information against potential harm" and "avoid pandering to lurid curiosity," tenets which are not being followed in the case of mass shootings (<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>).

Here is a telling example, on Jan. 6, 2016, the Society for Professional Journalism's Florida board passed a vote, 11-2, to support No Notoriety. And yet, six months later, on June 12, to our

knowledge, not a single news organization in Florida withheld the name and face of the Pulse Nightclub shooter in Orlando. This shooter so intently sought notoriety that he checked Facebook and search engines while still in the club, to see if his shooting had made it into social media or the news yet (<https://www.npr.org/2016/06/16/482322488/orlando-shooting-what-happened-update>). And again, Florida journalists plastered the name and face of the teenager who killed seventeen people in Parkland, despite their pledge. How much is the public really seeing the face of the killer and hearing his name, compared to say stories of victims, first responders, community impact, or expert analysis? Consider this recent study by Nicole Dahmen (2018): almost 5,000 images were cataloged from just three major newspapers in the first three days after three major mass shootings. Guess what percentage of those images were exclusively of the shooters? 94%. Just in those three newspapers, the public saw the faces of the shooters over 4,600 times in three days. Shooters know their fame is guaranteed.

Suicidality

Secretary DeVos, within your department, policies that could make a difference in mass shootings start with early identification of suicidal or very depressed students, as well as any student who “leaks” any kind of homicidal interest or intent. The research is clear that almost all would-be school shooters leak their thoughts or plans to other students, in writing, on social media, and sometimes tell adults, even in the form of “jokes” (O’Toole, 2000). Schools must train staff and students to take every one of these threats seriously and follow up on each one. Luckily, you already have some excellent school safety and threat assessment working models that show effectiveness in at least two large school districts.

For example, Dr. Weisbrot, a psychiatrist who consults with the Long Island, NY school districts wrote about the 114 students she personally followed up with, evaluated, intervened families, and treated, of which, none of them went on to commit school attacks (Weisbrot, 2008). Also, Los Angeles County Unified school district has a joint mental health professional-law enforcement threat assessment team that successfully thwarted more than 100 plans to attack their schools. The team follows up with the students for six months, and up to three years (<http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-school-shooting-prevention-program-20180227-story.html>). This district of 640,000 students, the second largest in the nation, has had no school shootings since the program was instituted eight years ago, other than one accident where a gun went off, having slipped through the metal detectors and periodic searches.

Homicidality

Secretary DeVos and Azar, as well as Attorney General Sessions, we do need your help evaluating and possibly updating the policy for mental health professionals regarding 72 hour civil holds related to intention to harm others. The standard Tarasoff rule appears to be inadequate regarding the new climate of rampage style homicide. The case of the Aurora, Colorado shooting that took place on July 20, 2012, illustrates my point. The Aurora shooter sought professional help in the months before the shooting and revealed his desire to harm others. It was reported to campus police at the University of Denver, where he attended graduate school. The University of Denver had an actionable behavioral and threat assessment protocol that many schools would envy. They had on-site mental health services, of which the shooter availed himself. Furthermore, the police and psychiatrist followed that protocol. Dr. Fenton followed Tarasoff's rule and alerted the police and his next of kin. The police interviewed the

shooter, but they were unsure if he needed to be committed. They asked the psychiatrist her opinion, and she erred on the side of least restrictive intervention – outpatient therapy, as most mental health professionals are trained to do (McGhee, 2013, January 15). Instead of completing treatment, he mercilessly killed strangers. Also in this case, the shooter’s mental health assessment would not have made it into the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) system to prevent him from buying guns, and because the psychiatrist reported that his threats were non-specific and no clear plan was told to her (part of assessing what to do based on the Tarasoff precedent), she did not feel she could warn any particular person or have her patient committed (Nussbaum, Steffan, & Ingold, 2015).

Social Isolation/Need for Ally

Does the consistent over-focus of media on the perpetrators of the crime contribute most heavily to the contagion? My research indicates yes. Would-be shooters are looking for someone to identify with: an ally. Media can either help them identify with the shooter or with the victims and heroes. Unfortunately, about 60% of new stories about mass shootings headline the mass shooter rather than victims, or other aspects of the event (Schildkraut, 2014). I advocate across the board media adoption of “Don’t Name Them,” as does the FBI. With no name, no face, no specific weapon choice, and no specific details about background, like bullying, loss of a parent, videogame interests, etc., there is no one for a lonely, suicidal, blame-oriented kid to identify with. The FBI can do their job adequately with no help from the media, unless a suspect is at large. And, the media can inform adequately using “the shooter” only, and moving on to the impact of the event. When media discuss causes of mass shootings, experts can speak about

shooters in aggregate, just as I have throughout this document and every piece of research I conduct: I never use any individual shooter's name, yet I probe the topic thoroughly.

Copycat vs. Contagion

Both the copycat effect and general contagion are at work with school shootings. Any biography of a killer can inspire copycat killings. That is always a risk when we delve deeply into and write extensively about the personal life of a murderer. We cannot stop disturbed young men from seeking or finding information on other disturbed young men and using their lives as templates for death, retribution and "glory." However, buying those books, and going to the effort to dig up those stories used to be the pastime of only a very disturbed, very rare few. That is copycat behavior: wishing to imitate or emulate a particular crime and criminal, and it used to take real effort, real sleuthing, to get that information (O'Toole, et al., 2014; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). The blitzing of killers' names, faces, stories, and weapons on every opening page of Yahoo, Bing, Facebook, BuzzFeed, New York Times, Washington Post, NPR, CNN, FoxNews, MSNBC; making all local shootings into national stories; means the public sees and hears about this crime at least every two weeks, and often daily, for months at a time. Contagion happens. A terrible crime begins to seem on the edge of "normal," and depressed, isolated, narcissistic individuals have an automatic go-to solution in their minds now: kill innocent strangers. Media contagion is not the sole blame for mass shootings, but I argue that no other cause (violent youth programming, mental illness/identification, and gun laws/access) is to blame for the steep increase in mass shootings in the last 17 years, because none of these other factors has increased significantly beyond year 2000 levels. Twenty-four hour, wall-to-wall news and social media have risen meteorically (Johnston & Joy, 2016).

Access to Guns

Lastly, and importantly, the contagion would go nowhere if kids were not accessing guns easily, and especially accessing semi-automatic or automatic weapons. Mr. Attorney General and Secretary Nielsen, this causal factor relates most to your agencies. I am not an expert on the impact of gun laws on mass shootings, but since you did not invite experts in this area today, I would be remiss not to mention a few of the facts my colleagues and I have amassed. Among developed nations, only Switzerland has equal numbers of guns per capita as we have (about 89 guns per 100 people). And only Switzerland has as many mass shooting deaths as we have per capita—that is until 2017, when we well-surpassed them (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, International Homicide Statistics, 2015). Other nations fall way behind us both in guns owned (often less than half or even a fraction of what we own) and in number of mass shootings and resulting fatalities, based on population. Across all 50 states, and over 20 years, those who own guns are much more likely to die from homicide. Towers, et al. (2015) found a significant, moderate strength correlation between mass shootings and gun laws in the U.S. In other words, the states who had the strictest gun laws had the fewest school and mass shootings. Finally, when mass shootings researcher Adam Lankford (2016b) tried to predict mass shooting across the world (controlling for population and urbanicity) using general homicide rates, suicide rates, and firearm ownership rate, only firearm ownership rate strongly predicted mass shootings. Lastly, we have the example of Australia: they instituted a nationwide ban on assault weapons and created a buy-back program with the goal of reducing the total weapons by at least 20% in 1996, after a devastating mass shooting. Australia has had ZERO mass shootings, and only one familial

shooting with multiple deaths in more than twenty years (Chapman, Alpers, Ahgo, & Jones, 2006).

Mr. Attorney General and Secretary Nielsen, I ask you to greatly restrict the sale of semi-automatic and automatic weapons across states, creating strict guidelines and training, so that anyone who can prove a need for one of these weapons demonstrates ability to pass mental health evaluation and receives extensive training, in a similar way that law enforcement and military are required to “earn” the right to utilize such weapons. I leave you with the story of a man seated next to me on a plane a few days ago. He asked what I did. I asked him the same. He was a career police officer in Portland, OR, headed to a special training for law enforcement in Arizona. Upon hearing about my research, he said, [in so many words] “I was a diesel-truck driving, confederate-flag-in-the-back-window, Harley-Davidson-owning, second-amendment-defending-rebel when I was younger. I still listen to conservative radio and news; I still drive the Harley; I have two kids; and I work to uphold the law every day, but I cannot see how anyone needs or should have semi-automatic or automatic weapons.” We found it easy to agree on that, and I believe you can do the same within your respective roles, engaging all of the American public, not just a very vocal few.

In conclusion, my place in this issue is to focus on the larger social climate and media climate, while acknowledging that the problem of school shootings has both targeted case-by-case solutions, but also sweeping national solutions that may not be as difficult to institute as we often think. Living together in a democracy is always about balance, about tempering security and freedom to provide the best good for the most people. It can be frightening to scrutinize an

amendment, both the first and the second, such as in this case, but I am certain we can find balance. There is a difference between re-writing constitutional law and voluntarily adopting policy. That is what I am advocating, that we ask the media to voluntarily shift focus and help state determine appropriate gun policy. In your positions as heads of departments, you have the power to influence and institute such policy.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

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