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VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

The sad state of mental-health care

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I have read of the Virginia tragedy with great sadness and listened to the voices demanding why more was not done to prevent the tragedy -- namely why was the shooter not counseled, committed, medicated or detained. Why did the teachers not see it or the family not stop it? There must have been someone who could have stopped a massacre.

Sadly, in the current state of mental-health care in America, I do not believe there was.

As someone who has a family member who is mentally ill, I am all too familiar with the system available for those who need help -- or the lack of a system. The National Alliance for Mental Illness recently graded the mental-health-care system in the U.S. and the national average for our mental-health care was a D.

Illinois received an F.

For years my family attempted to find suitable, affordable treatment for my brother. I sat and held my mother's hand as he disappeared for days on end, or made the phone call to the sheriff's department, asking officers to remove him from my family home as he made threats to harm my family.

I have sat in disbelief as the hospitals discharge him or the police dismiss him because "he has not hurt anyone yet."

I have expressed outrage when the state hospitals asked my mother, whom he had threatened, if he could move back home as the facilities did not have the funds, or the desire, to care for him. I have often wondered what if he caused harm? Would there be accusatory voices toward me and my family searching out for these "warning signs"? Of course there are signs, but what do you do when you actually see them? You cannot force commitment or medication without just cause. While protecting the rights of the mentally ill is of the utmost importance, at what point do we infringe upon these rights for the so-called good of society or the good of the family? That is a question that is difficult to answer.

Today my brother lives in a supportive-care facility and has chosen to take his medications. He feels safe and so does his family -- and for that I am grateful.

We need to take this opportunity to demand more for the afflicted and remove the stigma associated with mental illness in America. I find it disheartening that treatment for the famous has become trendy; everyone in Hollywood seems to be in rehab at a swanky facility for everything ranging from hate to substance abuse. However, for the mentally ill, the story is quite different and the largest mental-health-care facility in the state of Illinois is now, in effect, the Cook County Jail.

You may go to your college counselor and express concern over your drinking habits, but would you tell him or her about voices in your head or your depression? Most likely you would not and even if you did, where would they send you?

A more comprehensive system of mental-health care in this country could have saved many lives in Virginia. More warning signs would not have.

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