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Properly Funded Treatment Will Help Lead to Safer Communities

By Rep. Gene DiGirolamo (R-Bucks)

Republican Chairman, House Human Services Committee

The horrific murders of little children and their teachers in Connecticut have reignited the debate about safety in our neighborhoods and schools and how we deal with people who struggle with mental health and drug and alcohol issues.

While the debate goes on, I believe there is at least one thing coming out of this tragedy that all Americans CAN agree on and that we can do something about in very short order – and that is to ensure that people in need of treatment for mental illness or drug and alcohol problems are able to obtain that treatment easily and without obstacles.

Recent statements on this issue by Gov. Tom Corbett are heartening. At a news conference last month in the Capitol, the governor said, “If we help with mental health, hopefully that will make us safer.” And again, “It’s the mental illness issues that we have to work on as much as we possibly can.” (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Dec. 20, 2012)

As Republican chairman of the House Human Services Committee, I will be introducing legislation to restore \$84 million in state funding that was cut from these very services in the 2012-13 state budget enacted in June. The 10 percent budget cut affected seven human service line items -- mental health, addiction treatment (Act 152/MA Outpatient), intellectual disabilities, behavioral health services, children and youth, homelessness assistance and the Human Services Development Fund.

In addition, I expect to introduce legislation that will repeal the Department of Public Welfare’s misguided Human Services Block Grant Pilot Program that pits people in need of help and their under-funded programs against one another for

ever-shrinking funds. This legislation will eliminate the harmful provisions of the pilot program while providing counties with flexibility with any leftover funding.

Properly funded treatment for mental illness and addiction is not a luxury. To the contrary, waiting lists for this type of help around the Commonwealth grow each and every day. In my office – and I assume in other legislators' offices around the state – the calls come in every day from desperate families begging for life-saving help for their loved ones.

Connecticut's tragedy made it clear. We've paid too high a price already.

I implore my colleagues in the General Assembly and Gov. Corbett to join me in restoring cuts to these life-saving programs. Public safety is a core function of government and one that should rightfully be a priority in the state budget.

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