

Dallas Kennedy

Dear Select Committee,

My name is Dallas Kennedy. I worked four years in a residential treatment center for child with severe emotional and behavioral needs. I worked 13 years for Child Protective Services and I am starting my 5th year as a special education teacher. I have a master's degree in social work and am nearing completion of a PhD in Special Education at Texas Tech University. I have extensive experience working with children and families with mental health needs. Simply put, there is next to zero real mental health treatment west of Fort Worth. There are only a couple of child psychiatrists that cover an area from Lubbock to Abilene to San Angelo to the Permian Basin. There are only three psychiatric facilities in region. All are small, and except for the one in San Angelo, change hands frequently. They do not have the capacity to truly reach the mental health needs of our half of Texas. Our law enforcement agencies are woefully lacking in any mental health training. Even the larger law enforcement agencies out here only have one or two mental health officers or deputies. Frankly put, mental health treatment in West Texas is a band-aid approach, at best.

I live in Odessa and was here the day our city faced a horrible tragedy. We sat in our house with family watching the news as news anchors had to hide under the desk as they reported from their studio. My wife was on the road driving home not far from where one of the victims were shot. It was scary.

I have been physically attacked, had to restrain children for their safety, been threatened by adults who were having serious mental health episodes. I have had to call out mental health deputies for people threatening suicide while holding a weapon only to have the hospital decide the person was no longer a threat because they sat in the emergency room for 13 hours and were no longer threatening themselves (at that exact moment). I have seen some stuff. I have dealt with stuff. I have lost sleep because of stuff I have seen. I understand the problems we have. I 100% support more funding for mental health treatment.

Sadly, I see little to nothing you can do to stop gun violence from those suffering from mental health issues. Many people with serious mental health issues have never received treatment. Many refuse treatment. Unless they have had run ins with the law there is no record of them exhibiting mental health issues. You cannot stop gun violence. You cannot identify who will have a violent mental health breakdown. What can we do? Add more protectors. Identify school personnel who are willing to be part of an emergency team to respond to an active shooter. Train and arm that team. I do not believe it would be wise to allow all school teachers or school personnel to be armed, but if you have a team of trained persons ready to respond it could handle the threat before law enforcement could arrive.

Add more mental health deputies to law enforcement. Not social workers or case workers, but actual law enforcement officers who are armed and trained to recognize and handle mental health situations. Provide them extensive mental health training.

And finally, add more mental health beds and professionals. Treatment is key to prevention. Treat everyone who needs treatment. In West Texas especially, we HAVE to have real mental health professionals capable of providing that treatment. Prevent as much violence as we can but be prepared to face the violence in the tragic situations when it occurs.