

Public Health Crisis Needs Your Immediate Attention

An Open Letter to Congress from Witness Justice

September 22, 2006

On September 13, 2006, **Witness Justice**, in collaboration with the House **Caucus on Addiction, Treatment and Recovery**, hosted an issue briefing on the growing public health problem of psychological trauma in the United States.

The briefing was sponsored by 10 national organizations and endorsed by approximately 30 more (listed below)—representing mental health consumer groups, trauma survivors, experts, and advocates from a wide of range of interest areas (e.g. mental health, crime victim, veteran’s affairs, child abuse, disaster preparedness, homelessness, education, and more). There was clear consensus on the **need for a national trauma education and awareness initiative and that trauma be acknowledged, addressed, and supported by the various human service systems involved**. These include crime victim assistance, disaster preparedness and response, armed forces and veteran support, family education and support programs, social services, physicians, addiction and other treatment programs, faith communities, mental health professionals, and more) so that survivors have the greatest potential to heal.

Experts and survivors provided sound science, statistics, and personal stories to illustrate this urgent public policy issue—not only as it relates to substance abuse and mental health, but as an issue that has far-reaching and devastating consequences to the health and well-being of millions of Americans— men, women, and children—whether the cause of trauma is violent crime, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), war, or disaster (natural or man- made).

There is no doubt that psychological trauma is a major factor of physical and mental health that requires our immediate attention. This issue affects each and every one of us—costing our nation billions of dollars per year—and the urgency of this situation cannot be overemphasized.

The Impact of Unaddressed Trauma

Trauma, especially when untreated, can have severe and lasting impacts on a person’s physical and emotional well-being. Trauma has been linked to hallucinations and delusions, chronic depression and suicide, chronic anxiety, hostility, interpersonal violence, somatization disorders like chronic fatigue syndrome, and eating disorders including obesity and anorexia. **Trauma victims are at a much higher risk for co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders**, violence victimization and perpetration, and self-injury. Trauma is a major force underlying alcoholism and other addictions, and has been linked to social, emotional, and cognitive impairments, disease, disability, serious social problems, and premature death.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, which examined the health and social effects of traumatic childhood experiences over the lifespan of 18,000 participants, demonstrated that **trauma is far more prevalent than previously recognized**, that the impacts of trauma are cumulative, and that unaddressed trauma underlies a wide range of health problems (e.g. heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, liver disease, skeletal fractures, HIV-AIDS) and social problems (e.g. homelessness, prostitution, delinquency and criminal behavior, inability to hold a job).

Such childhood trauma and its impacts have been repeatedly documented in large studies; however, there remains a very serious lack of public understanding and awareness.

The Cost to Our Nation

The financial burden to society of undiagnosed and untreated trauma is staggering. Untreated trauma significantly increases the use of and further strains the financial resources of health care and behavioral health services, decreases productivity in the workplace, increases reliance on public welfare, and increases incarceration rates. **The economic costs of untreated trauma-related alcohol and drug abuse alone were estimated at \$160.7 billion in 2000.** The estimated cost to society of child abuse and neglect is \$94 billion per year, or \$258 million per day. For child abuse survivors, long-term psychiatric and medical health care costs are estimated at \$100 billion per year.

With the rising number of Americans involved in our nation's military efforts, the devastating impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the pervasiveness of violent crime and abuse, time is of the essence.

CALL TO ACTION

It is for this reason that we respectfully request that you:

- **Sign the letter to the President that you received yesterday (Sept. 21) from Addiction, Treatment and Recovery Caucus Co-chairs Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) and Rep. Jim Ramstad (R- MN),** regarding the need for a national trauma public education and awareness campaign.
- **Consider how psychological trauma may play a role in pending or future legislation.** This includes policy that addresses disaster preparedness and response, national defense and our armed forces, crime victimization (e.g. domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, child abuse/neglect), mental health, education, homelessness, teen/youth initiatives, and more.
- **Include programs, services, and funding in legislation** that will address trauma and provide short-term, intermediate, and long-term support through the healing process. Also clear is the need for **prevention** measures.
- **Support measures that address psychological trauma through models proven to be successful** (e.g. peer support).

We all must take note of and action on this pressing public health issue. We thank you for your attention to this matter and look forward to working with you to protect and improve the health and well-being of our nation.

Sincerely,

Helga West, President and Chief Executive Officer
Witness Justice

Co-sponsors and Other Supporters of the Issue Briefing on Psychological Trauma
September 13, 2006

The briefing was hosted, coordinated and sponsored by **Witness Justice** and co-sponsored by:

- **Andrus Children's Center**
- **Anna Foundation** (sexual abuse trauma)
- **Bazon Center for Mental Health Law**
- **Boat People SOS**
- **Kent Center for Human & Organizational Development**
- **National Center on Family Homelessness**
- **National Mental Health Association**
- **Stop the Silence, Inc.** (child sexual abuse prevention/treatment)
- **Vietnam Veterans of America**

Other Confirmed Supporters

- American Probation and Parole Association
- American Public Health Association
- American Society of Adult Abuse Professionals and Survivors
- Artemis Center for Alternatives to Domestic Violence
- Center for Gender and Justice
- Child Welfare League of America
- Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men and Women
- ElderServe, Inc.
- Family Non-Violence Inc.
- Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
- FORGE
- International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies
- Maryland Crime Victims Resource Center (f/k/a Stephanie Roper Foundation & Committee)
- Mental Health Liaison Group
(represents 53 national organizations that lobby on mental health services and/or research; includes Alliance for Children and Families, American Academy of Child and

Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, Children and Adults with Attention- Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Association for Children's Behavioral Health, National Association of School Psychologists, and Suicide Prevention Action Network USA)

- Missouri Institute of Mental Health
- National Coalition of Mental Health Consumer/Survivor-run Organizations
- Montgomery County (MD) Collaboration Council for Children, Youth and Families, Inc.
- National Consortium for African American Children (NCAAC)
- National Consortium of Treatment Accountability for Safer Communities (TASC)

Programs

- National Education Association
- National Empowerment Center, Inc.
- National Foster Parent Association
- National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children, Inc.
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center
- National Sleep Foundation
- National Trauma Consortium
- Sidran Institute
- Therapeutic Communities of America
- United Way of America