A Holistic Approach to Victim Services Must Include Gun Violence Prevention

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As an organization that exclusively provides free legal services to victims of crime, Rocky Mountain Victim Law Center (RMvlc) is deeply concerned about the prevalence of gun violence in the United States and Colorado. This is not a new concern; Colorado’s own history with gun violence and mass shootings is extensive, and RMvlc has provided services to many people impacted by those incidents. However, as we now have exceeded 250 mass shootings in the United States this year alone, we must do more to ensure there are fewer victims of crime in our country, and in Colorado.

Only 45% of violent crimes in the United States are reported to law enforcement. Even given this fact, in 2017 there were 23,351 cases of violent crime reported in Colorado. More than a quarter of those involved a firearm, including 62% of murders, 31.3% of aggravated assaults, and 41.9% of robberies. The risk of harm to all Coloradans, and to those who are victimized, is much higher when there is a firearm involved. For example, it is five times more likely a victim of domestic violence will be killed if there is access to a gun.

Although Colorado has taken some important steps toward improving community safety (requiring firearm background checks, limiting large-capacity ammunition magazines, requiring the surrender of firearms by domestic abusers, red flag laws), there is more than can, and must, be done. In addition to continuously improving the legal protections available via legislative efforts, it is absolutely essential that existing laws be enforced to ensure the increased protection of all Coloradans from victimization. RMvlc regularly works with victims of crime whose offenders have been ordered to relinquish their firearms following a conviction for a domestic violence offense, or entry of a civil protection order for domestic violence. Our clients routinely contact us with questions about why those orders are not enforced, and with serious concerns for their safety because their offenders still have access to firearms. As we look toward implementation of an Extreme Risk Protection Order law in Colorado next year, it is even more important that these laws are not just on the books, but actually enforced. We urge all courts, law enforcement, and prosecutors in Colorado to commit to the enforcement of these laws, and to ensure that the laws designed to reduce the number of victims in Colorado do their job.

RMvlc is also deeply concerned by the increase in hate crimes in Colorado and the United States. Anti-Defamation League data shows an alarming increase in incidents of hate in Colorado, which have risen by more than 5,600% since 2015. The increasingly prevalent and unaddressed incidents of hate speech and white nationalistic hate violence in our country are also increasing the risk that more of our community, specifically communities of color, will become victims of crime. This risk is exponentially increased when firearms are involved. This is not something we can ignore.

It is also important to advocate for media coverage that is accurate, productive, and protects the experiences and privacy of victims of crime. “Within the context of the legal system, if a victim is without privacy, all other remedies are moot.” In addition to protecting the privacy of
victims and their families, it is essential that we take measures to reduce the notoriety of people who commit horrible acts of violence. One specific result of a mass shooting in Colorado was the creation of the No Notoriety movement, led by the parents of a victim of that tragedy. There is specific research that shows notoriety is a motivating factor for perpetrators of mass violence. Committing to not using the names and images of these offenders, both in the media and as we address victimization in our community, is another critical tool in reducing the risk of harm.

RMvlc also recognizes the impact the events and media coverage has on the survivors we provide services, victim service providers we collaborate with, and our society as a whole. It is essential that we remain moved by tragedy, and that we leverage that emotion into action; but it is also important that we maintain our own resilience. Exposure to traumatic events in the media has a very real impact on mental health. If you or someone you know is struggling with the violence our nation continues to experience, and the media coverage related to recent events, know you are not alone and please seek support. Colorado Crisis Services can be reached by phone at 1-844-493-8255, or by texting “TALK” to 38255.

RMvlc provides quality legal services to victims of crime across Colorado. However, it is also essential that we, as an organization and a community, do all we can to reduce the incidents of victimization in Colorado and the United States. Addressing the dangers of firearms, enforcing existing laws, challenging hate, and improving media practices when these incidents occur are all ways we can do this. As we face an ever-increasing level of violence in our nation, RMvlc is committed to working to not only act after a crime has occurred, but to act to improve the safety of our community every day.