

PRESS RELEASE

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Legislative Commission focuses on connections between behavioral health and violence

BOSTON, MA... When it comes to violent behavior, we most often address the consequences. We rarely look to address the root causes. Recently, the Legislative Commission on Behavioral Health Promotion and Upstream Prevention turned its sights on upstream violence prevention.

Rep. Cantwell, House Chair of the Commission, started off the meeting by reminding the Commissioners that “though we often see violence as a criminal justice issue; it’s also a behavioral health issue.”

Scarlett Lewis, whose son, Jesse Lewis, was murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School along with 19 of his classmates, opened the meeting with a simple, powerful plea for action: invest in social and emotional health.

Lewis urged the Commissioner to focus on foundational skills, like self-regulation, coping mechanisms, and empathy. Skills that help kids manage stress and trauma and avoid negative behaviors like violence and substance use.

Citing the landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, Lewis noted that 50% of kids come to school traumatized. These traumas raise the risks children develop a behavioral health issue later in life. If we want to curb negative outcomes like violence and addiction, Lewis implored the Commission that investing in social emotional health is not an option, but a necessity.

Over the course of the meetings, the presenters, including Lewis, Thomas Abt, a former Chief of Staff at the U.S. Department of Justice, and Mollie Baldwin from Chelsea-based ROCA, made one thing absolutely clear: the challenges of preventing violence, mental illness, and addiction is not a problem of practice, but of policy and funding.

There are countless proven programs. The challenge is connecting the evidence-based violence prevention to private and public investments. The Commonwealth is investing in certain strategies like ROCA’s model which helps the highest risk young people avoid violence.

ROCA’s program works by 1) engaging those youth who often are the hardest to engage; 2) forging genuine relationships with them; 3) enrolling the youth in cognitive behavioral treatment; and 4) helping them find jobs that put them on the right track. For ROCA’s successes, they are one of a few programs that the state is investing in through the Pay for

Success model, which leverages private investment at the beginning with long term state payments for positive measurable outcomes.

The Commission is looking to use public-private partnerships to invest in a variety of prevention programs that could reduce addiction, violence, and mental illness.

The Commission will consider recommendations throughout the next 6-months before finalizing a report to the legislature. To learn more and watch the Commission's meeting, visit promoteprevent.com.