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FORCING PEOPLE INTO NEW MENTAL INSTITUTIONS WILL NOT PREVENT MASS SHOOTINGS

ALASKA - There has been a dangerous change in the public discourse following the recent mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio. Mass shootings are often blamed on “mental illness.” However, while recent discussions include suggestions that states should enact and enforce “red flag” laws, or report people who have been civilly committed to a firearms database, there is a new proposal that the public should guard against mass shootings by building new psychiatric institutions to house people with mental illness.

This idea arises despite research showing that those living with mental illness are much more likely to be victims of violent crime than to commit violent crime. It is important to note that in Alaska and many other states, although there are no “red flag” laws, there are already laws permitting the institutionalization of a person when they present a danger to themselves or others.

Building and operating more psychiatric institutions would reverse decades of positive change in public policy and social attitudes toward mental illness. Placing people in protective custody based on a disability classification would likely be unconstitutional. It certainly violates the United States Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Americans with Disabilities Act’s integration mandate in the case *Olmstead v. L.C. ex rel. Zimring*, in which Justice Ginsburg wrote that “unjustified isolation... is properly regard as discrimination based on disability.”

People living with mental illness can often be more appropriately treated in a community setting. Community treatment is also usually a more cost-effective treatment option for the public. The closing of psychiatric facilities that began in the 1960s was a half measure. Without simultaneously investing in the community resources to more appropriately and effectively treat those with mental illness, we have failed this community of people. We have succeeded only in deinstitutionalization, while allowing people with mental illness to go untreated.

Placing people living with mental illness back into psychiatric institutions now would just harm our communities and place those living with mental illness out of sight. It would only help avoid the difficult conversation of how we treat mental illness in Alaska and in the United States. Perhaps more dangerously, it serves the false narrative that equates mental illness with mass shootings.

Disability Law Center of Alaska opposes psychiatric institutions as a misguided answer to violence and continues to advocate for the community integration of Alaskans living with mental illness and supports further investment in community-based treatment.

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