

April 8, 2013

The Honorable Harry Reid  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leaders Reid and McConnell:

On behalf of the organized Jewish community, we write today to thank you for your leadership on gun violence issues, offer policy suggestions, and urge the Obama Administration and Congress to act quickly to prevent needless firearms deaths and injuries. In recent years, we have witnessed a profoundly distressing series of mass killings in schools, shopping malls, theaters, houses of worship, and elsewhere including the atrocity committed in Newtown, Connecticut in which 20 elementary school children were murdered along with six educators. These violent and horrific acts shock our conscience and country. The pandemic of gun violence in America far exceeds other western nations. The Jewish community itself has experienced this violence at community centers, Jewish federations, and elsewhere.

Jewish tradition inspires our concern with issues of quality of life and public safety and compels us to uphold the sanctity of life and the commandment against murder. The organized Jewish community has supported a wide range of legislative efforts designed to limit access to dangerous firearms such as the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, commonly referred to as the Assault Weapons Ban. While opinion polls indicate broad support for governmental restrictions on the availability of firearms, state legislatures and the U.S. Congress have all too often been hesitant to enact much needed gun legislation, with disastrous repercussions.

In just the past two years, we have witnessed horrific tragedies including the shooting of nineteen people, including Representative Gabrielle Giffords, in Tucson, Arizona, the massacre in an Aurora, Colorado movie theater, and the slaying of children and educators in a Newtown elementary school. In 2011 alone, the FBI reported that 8,583 individuals were murdered by firearms in the United States. It is estimated that an average elementary school age child will witness over 8,000 murders and as many as 100,000 other acts of violence before sixth grade. And far too many Americans lack access to mental health services that would reduce their isolation and help improve their lives. We must use the wrenching hurt and sorrow from these tragedies productively and confront our national policy challenges.

The organized Jewish community is committed to directly confronting gun violence in our communities and across the United States. We recognize the Second Amendment right of Americans to own guns, but we do not accept the current state of affairs. We also recognize the need to increase security at certain places of public and private gathering, but we refuse to accept

a dystopian formulation where schools, houses of worship, community centers, shopping malls, theaters, and other venues are locked-down and fortified or where more guns is the preferred solution for public safety.

Comprehensive action is needed to restore the safety of our schools, communities and public spaces and we urge you and your conference to support a strong and comprehensive approach to prevent gun violence. No single solution will prevent all future tragedies, and we encourage reasonable efforts to save lives which include:

- Meaningful legislation to limit access to the most dangerous weapons and high capacity ammunition magazines that have no other purpose than to inflict maximum carnage
- Registration and tracking for all firearms at the time of sale or subsequent transfer; and periodic licensing of anyone that purchases, owns, carries, and or uses firearms
- Appropriate waiting periods, volume sales restrictions, and background checks, including criminal and mental health histories, for all firearm sales, including private sales and gun show sales
- Legislation and regulations requiring the safe storage of firearms
- Government firearm buy-back programs
- Diligent enforcement of firearm regulations
- Robust efforts to ensure that every person in need has access to quality mental health care
- Encouraging a serious national conversation about violence in media and video games

Laws and regulations alone will not stop the spate of violence. Limiting access of dangerous weapons to those who may do harm, is absolutely necessary but not sufficient. We must also look at contributing factors and policies that may affect the gun violence. For example, a fully funded mental health system—one with true parity between physical and mental health—is vital to ensure the wellbeing of those in need. Programs at schools and community based organizations are needed to help destigmatize mental health issues and provide vehicles for early recognition, prevention, and intervention. Remembering that 96% of violent crimes are committed by people who are not mentally ill, the discussion about mental health issues related to mass violence should be done with the utmost sensitivity and not characterize all those with mental illness as violent. Rather, we should focus on all possible causative factors to gun violence and not shy away from examining the impact of a chronically underfunded mental health system.

Further, communities and families must examine the culture of violence that permeates movies, television, and video games which some feel may desensitize troubled individuals to the implications of pulling a trigger. We are committed to working with our network of organizations, civic partners, and other religious groups to provide needed guidance to parents, caregivers, teachers, and social workers on the implications of our culture of violence and how to protect our children from gratuitous depictions of brutality and bloodshed. These commitments add to and do not subtract from our ongoing concern about the use of guns in criminal activity and the appalling casualties that result from it, particularly in our cities and affecting minorities and youth.

We thank you and your colleagues for your serious and diligent work, and urge the Senate to embrace a comprehensive set of policy solutions to address this pandemic.

Sincerely,