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Faith community must fight mental illness stigma

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- The entire faith community is responsible, as individuals and collectively, for addressing the nation's mental health crisis that contributed to the tragedy in Tucson, Ariz., a Catholic organization said Jan. 26.

The Council on Mental Illness of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability said an underfunded mental health system and the "stigmatization, stereotyping and isolation from society" experienced by those who are mentally ill and their families were factors in the Jan. 8 shootings outside a Safeway grocery store in Tucson.

Jared Lee Loughner, 22, is charged with killing six people and wounding 13, including U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., in the incident.

"It seems evident that Jared Loughner was and had for some time been experiencing a mental illness," the council said in a statement. "We are saddened by the knowledge that with appropriate treatment this tragic act likely could have been avoided."

The group urged prayers "for those who have died, for the healing of those injured and struggling to recover, consolation for those who have lost ones they love, and peace for a community that has experienced this trauma."

Citing statistics from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the council said one family in five is affected by mental illness, with approximately 6 percent of the population -- or one person in 17 -- experiencing a significant mental illness.

"Most people with mental illness suffer silently, often hiding to escape the stigma of being known as a person with this condition, sometimes hiding in full view," the council said. "Regrettably, such

individuals often are unable to find access to needed services due to underfunded mental health systems incapable of delivering proper care."

In addition to the stigma attached, people with mental illness "may even lack support from a faith community unwilling or ill-equipped to welcome them as children of God, made in God's image and endowed with human dignity," the statement said.

The council offered resources and recommendations to help parishes and individuals "take the proactive steps needed to support parishioners experiencing mental illness and their families." Its recommendations included:

- Education about the causes of mental illness and treatments available.
- Advocacy for better services.

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- Actions against the stigma that keeps people from seeking help.
- Welcome and support in parishes for those with mental illness and their families "to help them overcome the isolation they often feel."

"Treatment works; recovery based on biological, psychological, social and spiritual health is possible," the council said. "As people of faith, we can provide a welcoming community and a faith life rooted in Christ, offering hope and comfort to those in most need."

The council was founded in 2006 to "assist the Catholic community in reaching out to and accompanying our brothers and sisters with mental illness and their families."

In a separate statement after the shootings, Mental Health America, a nonprofit organization formerly called the National Mental Health Association, said those with mental conditions "are no more likely to be violent than the rest of the population," although a small number of people "with a specific type of mental health symptoms are at greater risk for violence if their symptoms are untreated."

"Science has not developed tools to predict reliably individuals at risk for violence," the statement said. "But we can reduce the small risk of violence in those with certain mental health conditions by investing in proven intensive, coordinated community-based mental health services and making certain that they can access these services."

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Editor's Note: More resources to aid parishes and families in supporting the needs of Catholics with mental illness can be found at: www.ncpd.org/ministries-programs/specific/mentalillness.

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