Toolkit for Responding to Critical Incidents Involving a Person with a Mental Illness

New York—Each year, news headlines spotlight tragic incidents involving people with mental illnesses, which inevitably place state mental health commissioners, other behavioral health professionals, and emergency responders under public, media, legal and legislative scrutiny. Mental Health commissioners, in particular, are called on to account for perceived failures in the public mental health system and to respond to proposed policies and legislative fixes intended to prevent such incidents in the future.

“We have to accept that these tragedies happen despite the many efforts to prevent them. People in the spotlight need to be ready with clear and compelling responses that point the way to smart, thoughtful policy,” said CSG Justice Center board member and Illinois Mental Health Director Lorrie Rickman Jones, PhD.

The National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) and the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center released a publication this week, Responding to a High-Profile, Tragic Incident Involving a Person with a Serious Mental Illness: A Toolkit for State Mental Health Commissioners, which combines practical tips, supported by relevant research, to manage tragedies involving a person with a history or current diagnosis of serious mental illness.

“Although the publication was designed with mental health commissioners in mind, this is an invaluable resource for policymakers, anyone involved in the mental health system, and for law enforcement and other emergency responders to such tragedies,” said Fred Osher, MD, CSG Justice Center director of health systems and services policy. “The toolkit underscores the benefit to working collaboratively with journalists; family, consumer, and victims’ advocates; and experts in the field and first responders to ensure information is accurately and appropriately shared without undermining ongoing investigations.”

The toolkit provides information on the following:

- Practical communications and leadership advice before, during and after an incident
- Briefings on key topics
- Fact sheets
- Lists of online resources, checklists and sample contact sheets

A particular emphasis is placed on what the research shows about the perceived link between mental illness and violence. An extensive literature review and fact sheets identify the factors (such as substance abuse) that are associated with violence and support suggested talking points.

“The toolkit is important because it can help mental health and other professionals to prepare for, manage and evaluate responses to a tragic incident,” said Robert Glover, PhD, NASMHPD executive director. “It reflects our commitment to public health, public safety and the support of victims—and our unwavering goal to provide effective systems of care for individuals with mental illnesses.”

Responding to a High-Profile, Tragic Incident Involving a Person with a Serious Mental Illness is available as a free download at http://consensusproject.org/jc_publications/tragic-incident.

The Council of State Governments Justice Center is a national nonprofit organization that serves policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels from all branches of government. The Justice Center provides practical, nonpartisan advice and consensus-driven strategies—informed by available evidence—to increase public safety and strengthen communities.