

One year later

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Thursday, 26 December 2013 15:33

"We owe our children – the most vulnerable citizens in any society – a life free from violence and fear. –Nelson Mandela

"I've heard people say that the tidal wave of anguish our country felt on 12/14 has receded. But not for us. To us, it feels as if it happened just yesterday. And in the [months] since we lost our loved ones, thousands of other Americans have died at the end of a gun. Thousands of other families across the United States are also drowning in our grief."

"Please help us do something before our tragedy becomes your tragedy." –Francine Wheeler, mother of first grader Ben murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School

In the year since six-year-old Ben Wheeler was murdered by a gun in his classroom at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut along with nineteen other first graders and six teachers, more than 30,000 other Americans have been killed by a gun—30,000 more families now drowning in the same grief.

Sometimes these gun deaths made headlines, as when 15-year-old drum majorette Hadiya Pendleton was killed in a Chicago park in January just days after she had performed in President Obama's inaugural parade, or when twelve people were killed at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. in September. Sometimes families and friends felt all alone in their pain. There were children like 6-year-old Brandon Holt, who was killed outside his New Jersey home in April when his 4-year-old playmate brought a rifle out of his own house and shot him in the head. Or 16-year-old Bryan Herrera, a straight-A student at his Florida school struck by a bullet while riding his bicycle to a friend's house to do homework three days before Christmas. Or Kentucky 2-year-old Caroline Sparks, whose 5-year-old brother shot her in April with a .22 caliber Crickett rifle marketed to children that he had been given as a birthday gift. Or 10-year-old Aaliyah Boyer, who was hit in the head by "celebratory gunfire" while watching fireworks in a relative's Maryland backyard on New Year's Eve. Seven children or teens are killed by guns every day in America—enough since the Newtown massacre to fill 134 more classrooms of 20 children each. A child is killed or injured by a gun in America every 30 minutes.

One year later, what has been done? Despite personal visits from Newtown families to Congress to ask for action, Congress has done very little at all. In April the Senate shamefully put political calculations over the will of the American people and voted down a package of common sense gun violence prevention provisions designed to prevent future tragedies and the everyday gun violence that saturates the lives of children in America. Despite polls at the time showing nearly 90 percent of Americans and 74 percent of National Rifle Association (NRA) members supported expanded background checks, the Senate failed to pass new requirements for checks for purchases at gun shows and online, and other common sense gun safety laws.

One year later, despite Congress's appalling lack of action there has been important progress in some areas and states. The White House has quietly delivered on most of the executive actions President Obama promised in the aftermath of the Newtown shooting. The Obama administration has strengthened state and federal agencies' mandatory reporting to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). It has authorized the Centers for Disease

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Control (CDC) to research the causes of gun violence and what works to prevent it. The Obama administration found \$100 million to dedicate to expanding access to mental health treatment for the millions of children, youth and adults who struggle daily with untreated mental illness. The administration has provided tools and resources to assist schools, universities, places of worship, and law enforcement officials in dealing with emergency active shooter situations. And the Senate – after much delay and obstruction by pro-gun lobbyists – finally confirmed a full-time director for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

One year later, some states and localities have moved forward on their own to pass common sense gun violence prevention measures and stronger mental health laws. California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York have all passed significant new gun violence prevention legislation. In each of these states, ordinary citizens have said no more and lawmakers have displayed the courage to listen and lead and to stand up for child and public safety.

Ordinary citizens continue to join together by the thousands to say no more and to pledge along with the community members who formed the nonprofit Sandy Hook Promise: I promise this time there will be change. In honor of the anniversary of the Newtown massacre, groups including Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense and their "No More Silence" campaign have been holding events across the country to remind our elected leaders that their work is not done—and until their work is finished, neither is ours.

The next step we all must take is to demand that we see and name this huge public health epidemic that continues to kill more than 30,000 Americans every year and a child or teen every three hours and fifteen minutes and that is the second leading cause of death among all children and teens and the leading cause of death among Black children. Pediatricians and their American Academy of Pediatrics are leading the way by correctly approaching child gun violence as a major public health crisis, researching effective ways to protect children from gun violence, and urging the passage of common sense gun safety laws including universal background checks and safe storage for all guns. Now that the administration has ordered the Centers for Disease Control to resume the gun violence prevention work blocked by the NRA for many years, we must demand that it be fully funded so that the truth can be found and shared. We must demand that scholars be finally allowed to use the power of science and evidence-based research – the same tools we brought and bring to other public health concerns like auto safety – to impede and end the relentless and terrible toll of gun violence in America.

It is unbelievable one year and thousands of gun deaths later that it has been so hard to achieve major progress at the national level and in many states in protecting children instead of guns. We must never tire of the really hard work demanded to transform the pervasive culture of violence and pervasive presence of guns in America.

There's a Biblical story about a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In his city there was a widow who kept coming to him saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continuously coming." And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust

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judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them." (from Luke 18:1-7). All of us must persevere, persevere, persevere and like that persistent widow never lose heart.

We must love our children more than the gun manufacturers and some NRA members love their guns. We must love our country enough to ensure the safety of our children and of all of us. President Mandela is right: "We owe our children – the most vulnerable citizens in any society – a life free from violence and fear."

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org .