

Nevada judge: Mental illness at the root of mass killings

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY -- Nevada Supreme Court Justice James Hardesty said Monday that the country will not have success in reducing the tragic type of shooting incident that occurred Friday in Connecticut without providing more mental health support.

Hardesty, interviewed on the "Nevada NewsMakers" television program, said "we're going backward" on mental health treatment needs nationally and in Nevada.

"It's high time the country does something about these matters," he said. "And from the perspective of a judge who has worked hard to, and the judiciary as a whole, worked hard to promote mental health court as an example, we cannot achieve any success in any of these areas if we do not recognize the importance of being proactive in dealing with mental health issues in this country and in this state.

"And yet we're going backward," Hardesty said. "And I hope that these very sad incidents demonstrate the need to revisit these subjects."

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, in a report released in November 2011, said there is a national crisis in helping people with serious mental illness due to deep cuts in state spending for mental health services.

"States such as California, Illinois, Nevada and South Carolina, which made devastating cuts to mental health services previously, have made further cuts for fiscal year 2012, putting tens of thousands of citizens at great risk," the report said.

The NAMI report said states have cut more than \$1.6 billion in general funds from their state mental health agency budgets since 2009 while at the same time demand increased significantly.

The state Division of Mental Health and Developmental Services has more than \$7 million in general funding spending requests in the state budget "wish list" document released to the public on Friday. Many of the \$419 million in total state agency general fund requests included on the list are not expected to see funding due to a lack of tax revenue.

One of the mental health requests is for nearly \$200,000 for a clinical program manager and training for a new program to provide a continuum of care for clients reentering the community when being released from jails, prisons and forensic hospitals.

In his "NewsMakers" comments, Hardesty said the Second Amendment and gun control debate is a separate issue.

But the perpetrators of many of these terrible incidents are afflicted with serious mental health issues that require a proactive society, he said. Families who struggle with family members who suffer from such illnesses need help and support, Hardesty said.

Nevadans don't have to look to Connecticut to see the problem, he said, citing the Carson City incident in September 2011 where a man armed with an AK-47 assault rifle shot five uniformed National Guard members eating breakfast at a restaurant, killing three and another person before shooting himself.

The shooter, Eduardo Sencion of Carson City, suffered from mental health issues and was on medication. He left no note or explanation for the shootings.

"So I hope that it causes us, as a society, to look at what

will help be proactive and achieve some significant changes in those areas," Hardesty said.

On a positive note, he pointed to the successes of the state's mental health courts, where the focus is on diverting non-violent offenders with mental illness into treatment programs. The goal is to reduce or eliminate offender recidivism by treating their mental illness.

"And the more we can do to be proactive to support programs like that, the more we'll do to reduce the risks to our society caused by the Sandy Hook Elementary event," Hardesty said.