

# See gun violence as a health crisis

U.S. must concede the cost of firearm injuries, deaths to medical resources

BY MICHAEL DOWLING

On May 18, 10 people were killed in a school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas. Fortunately, no lives were lost on May 25 in another school shooting in Indiana, which marked the 101st U.S. mass shooting this year. Considering that it's only June 3, that means that 2018 has had nearly as many massacres as days. What's especially troubling is that 23 of those mass shootings occurred in schools.

Firearms are the third-leading cause of death among U.S. children ages 1 to 17. On average, from 2012 to 2014, nearly 1,300 children in the United States died each year from firearm-related injuries, according to a 2017 study in the journal *Pediatrics*.

These are infuriating and

distressing numbers, but there are other statistics, no less troubling, that are important to keep in mind. Here are a few: According to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, American trauma centers treat 1,565 gun violence victims a week, at an average cost of \$23,500 per patient, which means we spend about \$2 billion a year treating victims of gunshot wounds. In a separate study in the medical journal *Health Affairs*, three researchers from Johns Hopkins University put the numbers even higher: The average gunshot victim, they found, required about \$5,254 of emergency care and as much as \$95,887 in inpatient care.

The picture grows grimmer when you consider how these patients pay for their care. Researchers found that 41 percent of hospitalizations due

to gunshot wounds between 2006 and 2014 were paid for by Medicare or Medicaid, and nearly \$1.56 billion was incurred by people without insurance, many of whom never paid their bills.

You don't have to be a physician or a public policy expert to understand what the numbers mean: Gun violence isn't just a national tragedy; it's also a public health crisis. And that, oddly, is a bit of good news.

Gun violence often baffles and enrages us — it's painful to see young lives lost to pointless carnage — but if we treat it not as a political battlefield or a moral quandary but as a health challenge, we might begin to see solutions presenting themselves.

Deaths from cancer have declined because we figured out how to think about it correctly. This year, the American Cancer Society reported that cancer deaths have plummeted 26 percent from their peak in 1991, mainly because fewer Americans smoke. That decline was

not achieved merely by demanding that cigarettes be outlawed or questioning why smokers put themselves and others at risk. Rather, it was achieved by means that, viewed disparately, may seem like ineffectual cures for the potent disease: We attached warning labels to cigarette packs, worked with Hollywood to stop depicting smoking as glamorous or cool, and invested in giving smokers the education and the alternatives they needed.

If we want to do something about gun violence, the same old sounds and furies won't work. There are many arguments on both sides of the debate, but our partisan quarrels aren't stopping the next shooter from taking a life, his own or others. So instead of quibbling over the Second Amendment, let's focus on something on which we can agree: Gun violence takes an enormous toll on the nation's taxed health system, and we should work together to reduce that burden.

It's time to get creative. We should certainly invest more in mental health education and awareness, but we also should start selling guns with ominous warning labels, just as we do cigarettes. Among other potential solutions, let's consider handing out pamphlets at shooting ranges about the dangers of firearms, increasing public awareness of the fact that more 1,200 children in this country are killed or injured every year in accidental shootings because they got their hands on guns, often a parent's, and investing in outreach and education in communities particularly afflicted by gun violence.

Whatever the solution, it can't wait much longer. The epidemic is only getting worse.



Michael Dowling is the president and chief executive of Northwell Health.

## EXPRESSWAY

# A lonely old chapel finds a new spirit

BY ED DANIELS

There's an unassuming little cemetery on Wantaugh Avenue in Levittown called St. John of Jerusalem. It is right around the corner from my house and, as both my parents are buried there, I visit often to "talk" with them.

The cemetery was established by immigrant German farmers more than 160 years ago, when the area was known as Jerusalem. I like to look at the tombstones, many from the latter 1800s. They carry German names including Sparke, Mueller and Wiebel. The engravings on several have nearly worn away, a lesson to the living that time erodes even the sturdiest of memorials.

In the middle of the cemetery sits a white chapel built in 1856 as a German Methodist Episcopal mission. It has been declared a landmark by the Town of Hempstead.

Accounts say the chapel hosted services off and on as recently as 1969. Eventually, churches with more space and



St. John of Jerusalem Cemetery chapel, which dates to 1856, has been restored by volunteers.

conveniences, such as plumbing, were built, and the chapel was used less and less. Locked up, the building fell into disrepair.

But in recent years, something wonderful happened: a resurrection. Robert Wieboldt, a World War II veteran and Levittown pioneer, his son Rick Wieboldt

and members of the St. John of Jerusalem Cemetery committee stepped forward and with help of others restored the chapel to nearly its original state.

It wasn't easy. Rebirth requires sacrifice, persistence and heroic effort. Money had to be raised, including \$25,000 in grants. An asphalt shingle roof was added, the bell tower was rebuilt, and the white exterior was repainted. Crumbling interior walls were restored, 17 pews were rebuilt with pine and poplar materials, and the pine-plank floor was refurbished, as were the cabinets of the chapel's organ and piano. The project took eight years, but like the mythical phoenix, the chapel rose again.

In late April, I attended a celebration of the chapel's new life. Members of the community gathered for a rededication. We heard songs from local musicians and speeches. Ideas for using the chapel for community events, including a Christmas celebration, were shared.

The speakers reached back

from Levittown to Jerusalem, from the 21st century to the 19th, to reconnect with the spirit of that community that built the chapel. Rick Wieboldt's words to the group, "remembering and saving the past as we look toward the future," captured the moment.

Afterward, I stopped at my parents' grave. I made sure to tell them how grateful we should be to the Wieboldts and the others who embodied that same spirit of community and brought an important part of local history back to life.



Reader Ed Daniels lives in Levittown.

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