Attachment A

Statement on Colorado HB 13-1306

House Bill 13-1306 creates a task force that is charged with advising the General Assembly about issues including:

> "the loss, maintenance, and restoration of the right to purchase and possess firearms by persons who, as a result of mental health issues, alcohol abuse, or substance abuse, are clearly dangerous to the health and safety of themselves or others..."

Mental Health America of Colorado (MHAC) supports this effort to study how Colorado can take additional steps to minimize gun violence. However, we urge legislators and other members of the proposed task force to keep two critical facts in mind: (1) that the **vast majority** of people who commit violent acts against others with firearms have no mental health condition whatsoever; and (2) tragically, that the **vast majority** of deaths by firearm are suicides. We also strongly encourage that this bill be amended to allow for greater representation of individuals with mental health conditions and their families, especially those who have been affected by firearm suicides, on the task force.

We know that between 2004 and 2011 at least 4,362 people died from gunshot wounds in Colorado. More than **three quarters** of those deaths—3,315 men, women, and children—were suicides. Over half of all suicides in Colorado are committed with a firearm. More white non-Hispanic men kill themselves in Colorado using a gun than in almost any other state. Furthermore, Colorado is a military state. On average, 22 veterans of the U.S. armed forces kill themselves every day; more than sixty percent of those suicides are committed with a firearm.

MHAC raises this vital issue because, while the issue of mental illness and violence against others is something we care about deeply and work to prevent, the tragedy of suicide has been absent from virtually every discussion about gun control. We have seen many headlines about "keeping firearms out of the hands of the mentally ill," but no press about the lethality of suicide by firearm compared to other methods. We have witnessed vitriol from both sides of the gun control debate in committee hearings and on the Internet, but no outrage over that fact that suicide is the second leading cause of death among Coloradans under the age of 35.

The issue of firearms and suicide, like mental health in general, doesn't receive the attention it deserves because of the stigma associated with mental illness. Politicians and pundits continue to stigmatize people with mental health conditions by labeling a group that includes over one quarter of all Americans as "the mentally ill," and by repeating over and over that criminals who committed heinous acts did so because of a mental health disorder. Stigma does terrible things to people and public policy. It creates the incorrect belief that gun violence in our society is caused by individuals who have experienced mental health issues, and it allows a public health indicator as bright and clear as a surging suicide rate to be practically ignored.

Mental health conditions ARE health conditions—they do not belong to a separate category. At least 1.5 million Coloradans experience a mental illness or addiction problem each year. The growing trend of firearm suicides in Colorado is not an inevitable side effect of the existence of guns—it is a result of the combination of people experiencing the fatal symptoms of diagnosable and treatable mental health conditions, and the fact that for many Coloradans it is easier to acquire a gun than it is to access high-quality, affordable health care.

Mental Health America of Colorado supports HB 13-1306 as an important step to creating a safer Colorado, but we urge the task force to adhere to the facts when carrying out its work.

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