



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

**Department of Public Health**  
**Testimony before the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission**  
**February 22, 2013**  
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Good Morning, Mayor Jackson, Representative Lyddy, Dr. Schonfeld and other members of the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission. I am Dr. Jewel Mullen, Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Public Health. I appreciate the opportunity to share my observations on the state's response to the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School and to offer recommendations that may refine our preparation for crises in school settings.

My reflections are based on the work I was privileged to perform in collaboration with my colleagues after the Governor's partial activation of the State's Unified Command system on the afternoon of December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012. As you have heard, our work is not finished. Although this testimony is not intended to be a primer on public health emergency preparedness, my comments do reflect my agency's focus on all hazards preparedness. There are specific actions that we should perform during every crisis, including those in schools.

Within the State's Unified Command system, we knew soon after the shootings occurred that we needed to mobilize a large behavioral health team. Our response demanded resources different from those we employed to address other catastrophic events the state had managed in the previous 15 months. This time we were not confronting power outages, food and sheltering needs, and overtaxed health care systems as we did following Storms Irene and Sandy and the October 2011 nor'easter. Still, as in those other circumstances, our response called for integrated activity between federal, state and municipal government to coordinate a number of services and to mobilize responders.

Accordingly, as we identify ways to support schools, we must recognize that that they exist as part of larger systems – local, state and federal. Our framework for supporting schools should explicate the components of those larger systems which should be brought to bear for an effective response and recovery following a crisis.

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Acknowledging that my colleagues also have shared their lessons learned in our response to Sandy Hook, I will highlight, from a public health perspective, successes and other lessons learned that we should consider in the strategy to support schools in the future:

1. We operated in a strong Unified Command system, led by Governor Malloy and the Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. The unified command structure ensured that we maintained situational awareness about events occurring within the school system and at the Sandy Hook fire station which had become the local incident command post where many of the activities of responders, public safety and volunteers were coordinated. This framework enabled our simultaneous, intense focus on different aspects of Newtown's response. For example, some of us assisted the school system's planning to address the needs of students while some helped municipal agencies with other responsibilities.
2. Recognizing the magnitude of the crisis, we promptly requested federal assistance on December 14th. Collaboration with partners from the United States Department of Health and Human Services was invaluable. Our Region 1 partners and members of the U.S. Public Health Services Commissioned Corps who traveled from across the country supported the school system and town emergency responders with planning and logistics. They also delivered direct behavioral support services to families, town/school personnel and responders.
3. My colleagues listened to town officials and teachers in order to determine how to best meet the community's needs. We understood that resilience was one of their strongest assets. We were and cognizant that they had endured other recent challenges. Especially throughout the weekend after December 14<sup>th</sup>, a number of us who were present in Newtown talked about the cumulative impact of recent life events on community residents and responders – just about 6 weeks post-Sandy and a little over a year after Irene and the October Nor'easter. We did not make assumptions about their ability to cope or to have primary authority over plans for their short and long-term recovery. Moreover, my colleagues expertise in trauma-informed care was apparent.
4. We maintained the ability to correct course if needed, respecting the ultimate authority of municipal and school leaders who were the primary decision makers.
5. We learned quickly that an effective plan to restore 'normalcy' for and aid the recovery of the school's children required that we first address the needs of the school personnel who would have to implement that plan.
6. We modeled strong state agency collaboration. I want to underscore that effective interagency partnership is something we have worked to achieve for the past two years. We did not have to figure out how to work as a team. We have remained committed to learning from our efforts as we determine how to perfect our future work.

Based on these observations, please consider the following recommendations as you draft a strategy for supporting schools through crisis events:

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1. Utilize the state's unified command system to guide the response and recovery.
2. Strengthen the integration of our educational and behavioral health agencies into the unified command system. We can start with a formal after action review of the Sandy Hook events and then a table top exercise with other state agencies.
3. Through an after-action assessment we can also determine strategies to ensure that response systems like those established in the school system and fire station function as seamlessly as possible. A school system's response and recovery are linked to that of its town.
4. As was done following the work of the Two Storm Panel, consider holding a drill or practice exercise that involves school personnel as incident commanders. Given Connecticut's decentralized government, with a number of towns that rely on part time services and shared regional assets, there may not be a "one size fits all" framework for assisting every school, but there ought to be a basic framework that each town starts with.
5. Continue to create and nurture relationships with community partners, experts and the individuals who offer to assist during a crisis so that coordinating the resources they offer does not threaten the effectiveness of our collective response.
6. Communicate with our federal and regional partners (emergency medical services, education, homeland security, mental health and public health) to learn about and create an inventory of assets they can provide to assist us in future responses.
7. Strengthen our knowledge base about how to meet the needs of the adult personnel who are part of the crisis response in their schools; and ensure that we have a plan to address those needs promptly. As we look to them to support their children, we must support them as well.

Leadership that was informed by expertise, emphasized partnerships, and upheld local authority was essential to our response to the events at Sandy Hook School. It is needed in our response to all school crises. I would be happy to answer your questions Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts.

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