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NEWS

200 NORTH GLEBE ROAD ♦ SUITE 730 ♦ ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA 22203 ♦ 703 294 6001

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CONTACT:

Alicia Aebersold, at 703 294 6008 or aebersolda@treatmentadvocacycenter.org
Stacy Fiedler, at 703 294 6003 or fiedlers@treatmentadvocacycenter.org

Virginia Tech Review Panel calls for reform of mental health treatment law ***Gov. Kaine's independent panel urges less restrictive commitment standard***

Arlington, Va. – What happened to keep Seung Hui Cho from getting needed treatment and at what point could the Virginia Tech massacre have been prevented? The state-appointed panel charged with answering those questions released its report today, stating in part that “The Virginia standard for involuntary commitment is one of the most restrictive in the nation and is not uniformly applied.”

The report details the many lost opportunities to help Cho and makes recommendations to improve Virginia's restrictive mental health treatment law.

- **The panel recommended that the involuntary treatment criteria be improved to “allow involuntary treatment in a broader range of cases involving severe mental illness.”** The current standard for involuntary commitment in Virginia for someone with a severe mental illness requires a person to be an “imminent danger to self or others” before he or she can be court-ordered to treatment. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to treat someone before they have harmed themselves or someone else, or threatened to do so. About half of states have more humane standards that focus on the person's deteriorating condition and “need for treatment,” rather than requiring them to deteriorate to “dangerousness.”
- **The panel recommended that “reports of prior psychiatric history” be presented at the commitment hearing.** Current Virginia law instructs magistrates to rely solely on what is happening currently with a person with untreated severe mental illness, ignoring what happened in the past. That means past episodes of violence, psychiatric history, and past treatment are not considered. As is clear from the extensive report on Cho, past history is not only relevant, but oftentimes critical.

“Gov. Kaine and the independent panel should be commended for not only identifying many of the flaws in the system that prevented Cho from getting treatment,” said John Snook, “but for recognizing the critical importance of a strong assisted outpatient treatment program that will allow humane intervention before tragedy strikes.” Snook is the legislative and policy counsel for the Treatment Advocacy Center, a national nonprofit dedicated to removing barriers to timely and effective treatment of severe mental illnesses.

“It now falls on the legislature to act to improve state law,” said Snook. “Families across Virginia are struggling to help their loved ones. There is no question people who are clearly psychotic should get treatment. But Virginia needs to do better than that, as the Governor's panel recommends, and help people before they become a danger.”

The Treatment Advocacy Center (www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to eliminating barriers to the timely and effective treatment of severe mental illnesses. TAC promotes laws, policies, and practices for the delivery of psychiatric care and supports the development of innovative treatments for and research into the causes of severe and persistent psychiatric illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

We take no money from pharmaceutical companies. The American Psychiatric Association awarded TAC its 2006 presidential commendation for “sustained extraordinary advocacy on behalf of the most vulnerable mentally ill patients.”