

New Hampshire **Bulletin**

COMMENTARY

Healing for the NH deaf mental health community after Lewiston, Maine

I expected our community to be silenced in yet another mass shooting. It wasn't.



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An altar to honor the victims of the Lewiston mass shooting was erected for an Oct. 29 vigil at the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Lewiston. William Brackett was one of four deaf men killed. (Emma Davis/Maine Morning Star)

Over the past few weeks, our local deaf community has been planning and attending the wakes, funerals and celebrations of the lives of four deaf men killed in the October 25th Lewiston tragedy: Billy Brackett, Bryan MacFarlane, Joshua Seal, and Steve Vozzella. As announcements of the plans unfolded, I've been struck with a mental image of a wake from a boat on a body of water. A wake is visible trail of disturbed water left behind after loud turbulent boat comes through. The water has ripples, and we are left floating with the motion of the ripples while watching the loud turbulent boat move on.

As a deaf director of our statewide deaf mental health program here in New Hampshire, I immediately understood this could have happened in any of our New Hampshire towns instead of Lewiston. Our first priorities were to ensure

our team of deaf mental health professionals had the time and space to grieve ourselves, and to remain connected with the individuals and families we currently support throughout New Hampshire. Lewiston's shooting was the 10th most deadly shooting in the US, and the deadliest act of violence directly impacting our American Deaf community. Nine deaf community members were gathered to enjoy the local weekly cornhole league at a local bar. In addition to the four who were killed, two were injured and three were able to escape without physical injury. There is no number to capture the impact throughout the community left in its wake.

As part of a community that is rich in cultural and linguistic diversity, I am quite accustomed to discussions around challenges, inequities and systemic barriers that perpetuate the marginalization and oppression of our community. I expected this to continue. I expected our community to be silenced in yet another mass shooting in our country.

Instead, among the rippling waters in the wake of the shooting, I have witnessed the collective POWER of our community. Thousands of dollars have been raised for the victims' families, deaf community organizations and schools in Maine. Thousands of people have gathered for vigils across the country. The mobilization of support, including mental health services and interpreting services that I witnessed is unprecedented in my twenty years working in the field. Gillette Stadium held a moment of silence for all 18 victims prior to the start of an NFL game. Images of the entire stadium flooded our social media, as well as several other large gatherings of people holding up the "I Love You" sign in support of our community. Governors and other elected officials across the country are acknowledging the value of sign language interpreters in public announcements. Deaf artists have created commemorative artwork to raise funds and are struggling to keep up with the demand. This is collective power. Our community is strong; it reaches far and wide. It is full of hope and love. Our community is seen.

If you or someone you care about is struggling to cope, help is available:

The Disaster Distress Hotline (DDHVP) supports videophone (VP) callers who have been affected by natural disasters or human caused disaster including violence in the community. Videophone (VP) callers across the US can call now 988 and reach an ASL-fluent crisis support provider.

You may also call or text 988, or chat online with a crisis support provider at 988lifeline.org/chat.

NH community members are encouraged to call or text 1-833-710-6477 to ensure a response from local crisis support providers. GNMH Deaf Services can be reached at 603-821-0073 and deafservices@gnmhc.org. We are here for you.

Over time, the wakes dissipate, and we are left with calm waters again. Underneath the reflective surface of the water, we know there can be turbulent pain, anger and grief in the unseen currents. Families are left without their partners and parents. Communities move on without their coworkers, their teammates and their friends. What will this feel like? Time heals all things but the healing hurts. As people pick up the pieces of their lives, time is both healing and heartbreaking.

It is important to remember that how we respond to trauma and stress varies among individuals and is rarely a linear process. Our deaf community has collectively responded to this tragedy in a way that empowers all of us to look ahead in our journey with hope and resilience. Our shared values of storytelling, sharing information and honoring our resilience are our tools for healing. Healing is not just for tragedy. Healing also supports our personal growth and wisdom. What can we learn from this? How can this make us stronger?

I look ahead to the upcoming holiday gatherings. They will be hard. Many of us will experience sadness, loneliness, and sometimes wanting to be alone. We may also experience anger, resentment or numbness. It is important to listen to our bodies, our thoughts and our emotions. Our body will tell us what it needs. This is part of the human experience. While grieving, it is important to remember that connecting with our friends, our loved ones, and community will provide a strong foundation for healing.

Deaf Services at Greater Nashua Mental Health is committed to supporting our community's healing and growth, similar to a lifejacket while we all float on in a wake. Our mental health services are available to all deaf community members across the state of NH who are affected by the Lewiston tragedy as well as any stressors impacting our mental health. Our team is working closely with our community partners to coordinate and hold community healing groups throughout the months ahead. In the meantime, we must remember to listen to our bodies, stay connected to each other and not forget that we are stronger together.