

## Andrus chief attends White House panel on gun violence

By Jackie Lupo

Brian Farragher works with children and families in crisis. As executive vice president and chief operating officer of Andrus, a nonprofit school and residential treatment center for troubled kids in Yonkers, Farragher sees kids every day who have been directly affected by guns. So, when President Obama decided to assemble a series of expert panels to discuss issues surrounding gun violence, the name of Farragher, a mental health professional who has 25 years of experience in the subject, was high on the list.

"I was invited to the White House [Jan. 11] to be part of this conversation around gun violence," Farragher told the Enterprise. "There was a series of conversations that whole week, to take a hard look at the issue of guns and gun violence and to begin to formulate recommendations." Farragher said he was part of an eclectic group of about 30 people from various organizations, such as foundations and nonprofits.

He said he was impressed with the character of the meeting as part of the democratic process.

"This is a really polarizing, challenging issue. But at the meeting I was part of, there were a lot of different perspectives. I felt like this is how democracy is supposed to work."

Farragher said the group discussed how other issues affecting child safety or health, such as seatbelts and cigarette smoking, had been "rebranded," to the extent that the safety message became fully accepted by the public. "How do you rebrand this issue?" Farragher asked. "What do we want to do to reposition this?"

He said that his panel discussed the issue in the context of child safety.

"It really is about 'how do we keep our child safe?', not necessarily just to get guns out of the equation," he said. "Although in some situations, a reduction in guns is probably necessary." Some of the ideas that were discussed by the different panels made it into the piece of legislation put forward by the president. Most involved finding out the causes of gun violence, and seeking out some of the common factors.

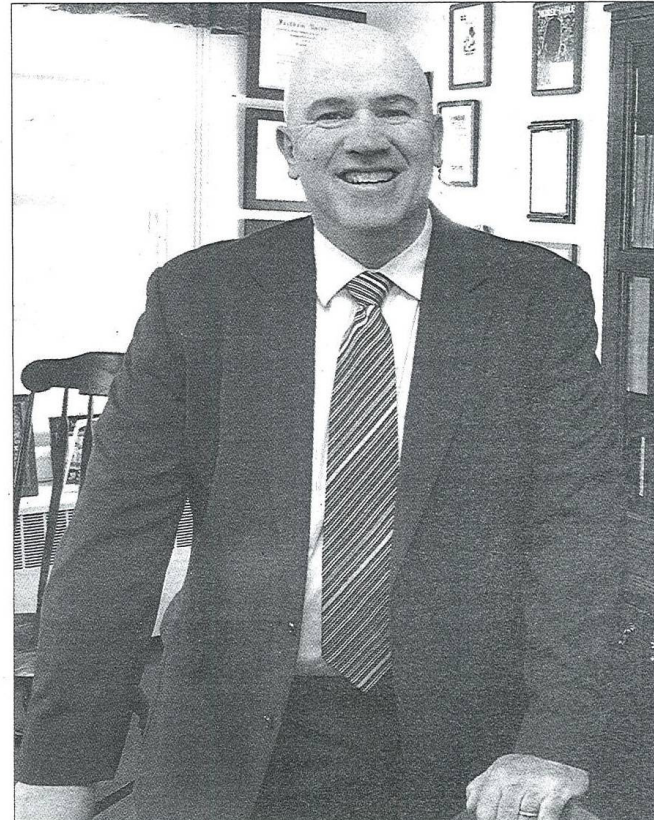
As a mental health professional, Farragher recommended a cautious approach to analyzing the connection between mental illness and gun violence.

"It's complicated," he noted. "Obviously, somebody who would walk into a school and shoot a classroom full of children is mentally ill. My concern about that is what I know about the issues of mental illness. The idea that we can predict who's going to do something really sinister, or something terrible, is a bit of a pipe dream. I don't think these are predictable events; they're really freakish events."

Having said that, Farragher added that doing more routine assessments of children's mental health in schools should be done, the same way schools routinely test children's hearing and vision.

"We need to de-stigmatize mental health issues," he said. "These people are not out on the margins. They're just like you and me. How to get people to get help earlier in their lives — that's the part I think is useful." What Farragher said he did not believe was "the idea that if somebody's in mental health counseling, we'll be able to predict who's really dangerous."

Would requiring mental health pro-



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Brian Farragher in his office at Andrus.

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professionals to report patients who might commit a violent act keep such people from seeking help? Farragher noted that that could indeed happen, but that there are already laws on the books about reporting a patient "if somebody makes a direct threat."

Farragher said that although the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School were horrific, he wanted to emphasize that attention needed to be paid to the issues of gun violence overall.

"Children are shot every day in this country," he said. "There are 350 kids shot every week in this country. There are shootings in cities all over this country every day. The issues of violence in this country are staggering."

He said that an event in a quiet suburb like Newtown, Conn., "catches our attention. But kids are getting shot in our streets all the time." As for those victims, Farragher said sometimes society has a "tendency to blame them — they're in gangs, etcetera. But they're kids."

Farragher urged people to look at the violent rhetoric that has become part of everyday life.

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"We can't just disagree; we have to kill the guy. The language in this country inspires violence. I think we have to look at all that. This is not a simple issue of guns or mental illness."

Are kids inoculated against the horror of guns?

"There is a lot of desensitization to guns and gun violence," said Farragher. "It's all around us in a lot of the stuff we see and hear. Through movies and videos, kids see like 25,000 people shot before they're 18. So there's a certain desensitization that comes with that. But that doesn't mean they're going to shoot anybody. It's part of the culture in our country."

Farragher said there are some things parents can do to make kids feel safe, despite all the discussions about Sandy Hook that they might see on the news.

"There's some hyperbole with all this," he said. "My experience is that if parents feel OK, the kids do OK. First, this is a freak thing. It's terrible, but this does not happen every day. This is a very rare occurrence. Although this is happening more, with the shooting in Aurora [Colorado], it's still very rare. I think people should not be responding from a place of fear, but should be responding. It makes me very sad, it makes me very angry, because we're not doing a good job as adults in this country."

Farragher said it was important for parents to reassure kids that their school is safe, that there are people who love and care about them and who will protect them. This is very infrequent; there are a hundred thousand schools in this country, and this is not something that is going to happen in their schools."

He noted that to reassure their children, parents first have to reassure themselves. "Most days in this country, we live pretty safe lives. That's one challenge in a suburban community. For kids in inner cities, kids who are black and brown, gun violence is a daily threat. For parents who are living in these communities, it's a real challenge to reassure kids that they are safe."

Farragher was reluctant to overemphasize the connection between violent movies, video and computer games and gun violence.

"My sense of it is, how do you help kids to balance that out?" he asked. Certainly, he said, kids shouldn't be spending the entire day playing video games that are violent. And little kids probably shouldn't be playing games for mature audiences.

"But parents should be talking to their kids about what these things mean," he said. "Parents are crucial in helping their kids figure out the world. When watching these movies, it's an opportunity for dialogue. If kids are exposed to these things, it's OK to talk about issues of violence, and to talk about guns and talk about safety." He said that people worry sometimes that if you talk about this subject it will upset kids. "But the more you talk to kids about their experience, the more connected they'll be to us."