

Heed the warning signs of mental illness

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Cho Seung Hui has joined an infamous and maddening list of killers who were mentally ill, whose treatment - if any - was inadequate, and whose ultimate act might have been averted had the warning signs been noted and the law properly written and implemented.

As with every name added to that list, society now proposes to react. Ban all guns. Barricade all buildings. Find a system that instantly spreads notice of trouble far and wide. These are responses with hindsight, and with the presumption of a next time.

What we need is a system of foresight and prevention, a system that identifies severe cases and has myriad treatment options, particularly one that is legal in many states but used far too seldom: a court order for involuntary commitment to fully determine and deliver care - inpatient or monitored outpatient care.

That may seem an overreaction, especially when no violent act has yet occurred. But waiting on a violent act is waiting too late, for both the violent and the victims. Thirty-three dead in Blacksburg remind us again.

Whatever Virginia Tech administrators and law enforcement did or didn't do Monday, the path Cho took began long before he shot chilling videos, then his victims. Taken separately, some of the warning signs might have seemed idiosyncrasies - the hat, the sunglasses, the rudeness, the muteness, the writings, the solitude.

But taken together with stalking young women, scaring classmates and professors alike, they become sinister indicators of a major problem.

These indicators were taken together when Cho was referred to Virginia Tech's counseling center in 2005. He was temporarily and involuntarily detained, as provided by law, for a hospital evaluation. He was found to be "an imminent danger to himself as a result of mental illness" and ordered into outpatient treatment.

He didn't show for treatment. Apparently no one followed up. And the court's finding of his mental illness was not entered into any records that would have kept him from legally buying the guns he used. Had the system not failed him, Blacksburg might have been spared 33 deaths.

We cannot let the system fail. Cho became by any person's reckoning a danger not only to himself but to others, although his future behavior was hard to predict. Because of that unpredictability, the law should allow

involuntary detention based on current actions and past history of mental illness.

No one wants anyone held involuntarily without reason. No one wants anyone housed in Dickensian facilities. There can be, however, times when one person's continued liberty collides with the public's safety. This week's shooting spree was such a time.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Heed the warning signs of mental illness by The San Diego Union-Tribune