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America was and is heartbroken over the horrific events in Newtown, Connecticut. As a parent, grandparent and former teacher, I can only imagine the pain of losing precious and innocent children to such terrible and senseless violence.

Our prayers and hopes for healing go out to the people of Newtown, to the families and friends of the five people killed at Accent Signage in Minneapolis in September, and to all those affected daily by violence in America.

We cannot ignore the carnage. Events compel us to reexamine what has happened, and to do what we need to do to make sure it does not happen again. These actions horrify all Americans, including gun owners and sportsmen.

As we seek answers, it is important to understand two things.

First, the deeper solutions lie in better mental health. Without exception, the perpetrators of violent acts such as occurred in Newtown and Minneapolis have demonstrated serious mental health problems.

It's a fact of modern life that tens of millions of Americans experience mental health issues of one kind or another. While it is rare for mental illness to drive sufferers to extreme violence, consequences such as alcoholism, abuse, depression and joblessness do render many people frustrated, hopeless and unable to enjoy life to the fullest.

We need to expand our health care system to provide far better mental health services to help prevent tragic violence and benefit not only sufferers, but also families, friends, colleagues and society as a whole.

Second, the state of Connecticut, where these latest shootings occurred, has some of the toughest gun control laws in the nation. Moreover, the Constitution and the U.S. Supreme Court have affirmed and re-affirmed the right of citizens to own guns for self-protection and for hunting. Potential challenges to Second Amendment rights would needlessly divert us from meaningful action.

That said, we need to institute a Constitutionally valid ban on civilian purchase of military assault weapons designed only for the purpose of killing large numbers of people. We need to outlaw so-called 'maximum capacity' shell clips. And we need to close the gaps in requirements for background checks.

Now our great nation faces a choice. We can grieve over this latest tragedy, and then return to the partisan bickering that too often prevents us from finding real solutions. Or we can, as President Obama has stated, "take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics."

I look forward to working with the President, the Vice-President and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to make America safer for all our citizens.