Dear Mr. Attorney General:

On behalf of the American Counseling Association and the American Art Therapy Association, the world’s largest membership organizations representing professional counselors and art therapists, we are writing to share our concerns over your recent remarks. The remarks contained in your speech to the Turning Points USA High School Leadership Summit were dismissive of counseling and mental health services, as well as those who express their feelings, and those in need of support after events of recognized trauma.

It is unconscionable that you make light of the use of therapy dogs for students who are traumatized after school shootings. Your statements were disrespectful in many ways and fail to acknowledge that:

- Counseling is an effective intervention for victims of trauma and may help ameliorate further problems.
- Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of working with therapy animals with some clients.
- Art therapy is an effective means of working with clients who may prefer to express themselves through media and not solely through language.
- Many people benefit from counseling; it helps them understand their behavior and actions and helps them relate better to others.

Your remarks were highly misguided and they further stigmatize young people who seek mental health services and ways to manage stress at a critical transitional time in their lives.

Students face tremendous pressure—and their age group has an alarming rate of suicidality. The suicide rate among young adults, ages 15 to 24, has tripled since the 1950s, and suicide is currently the second most common cause of death among college students, according to the American College Health Association (ACHA).

College is a transformative time in a young person’s life. They are exploring their identity and navigating a multitude of stressors, including career and academic goals, family and peer relationships, managing finances, and dealing with health problems or substance-use issues. The ACHA reports that a quarter of college students cite anxiety as the leading factor contributing to academic struggle.

Higher institutions are, for good reason, working to increase the reach of counseling services in their mental health centers and to foster the awareness of mental health needs and resources in their communities through campus-wide events focused on reducing anxiety and stress. Many of these events center on art-making activities, informed by evidence that the process of making art can influence neural pathways and lead to improved physical and mental health. Addressing mental health and emotional needs can foster resiliency and should, therefore, be viewed as a strength and not a weakness.
The process of creating art has many benefits, including helping to improve focus and reduce stress and anxiety. Making art helps to draw the focus to the “here and now,” allowing for a greater awareness of the immediate environment, and can channel energy into productive outlets, providing a socially acceptable release of emotions and tension. Art making can help students think creatively, which can translate to critical thinking skills used in the classroom and in daily life. Group art-creation events can be a powerful way to bring people together and foster community support.

It is important to understand that art therapy is a regulated mental health and human services profession. Art therapists apply training in psychotherapy and the creative process to guide a client toward individual goals through the therapeutic relationship. The creative process is beneficial for everyone, especially for those who have experienced abuse, as it offers a way to “tell without talking” when someone is unable or afraid to speak about specific events or feelings. Art therapy with students helps improve sensory motor skills, emotional regulation, and cognitive growth.

Outlets for creative expression, including art making and art therapy, can help support the continued growth and development of a generation of mature and well-informed adults who can engage in critical thought, open discussion, and informed, respectful debate.

Educational institutions recognize the need for—and should be encouraged to provide—high-quality mental health centers and community-wide activities that promote mental health awareness that destigmatizes mental illness and provides community support.

Perhaps you were unaware of these facts and statistics and did not realize the value in counseling and art therapy. But, while this may be the case, you are certainly aware of the increase in violent acts by individuals in dire need of mental health treatment.

To openly disparage proven therapies and those administering these therapies in an attempt to score political points is beneath the dignity of your office. We ask that you apologize for your remarks and, in the future, refrain from making thoughtless comments like these.

Sincerely,

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