Arizona's mental health system has faced a great deal of scrutiny since the story of Jared Loughner, the alleged gunman in the Tucson shootings, unfolded on news outlets throughout the world. Critics say that the troubled young man could have been helped by mental health programs in his community, but that two years ago those programs were eliminated when the state cut $65 million from mental health services to shore up its budget deficit.

Whether Mr. Loughner would have used the services if the services were available is unknown. However, we do know that mental health treatment services, when they are available and when they are used, work.

Arizona and Washington are part of a long list of states that have made massive reductions in their mental health programs over the last two years. Between 2009 and 2012, state mental health system budgets nationwide are expected to be reduced by a whopping $2.2 billion.

The budget cuts have closed the doors to hundreds of treatment centers, forced the layoffs of case workers and reduced subsidies for outpatient counseling, medications and family support services. And while access to critical treatment and support services is being reduced, demand for these services is increasing, resulting in growing waiting lists for mental health services in many states, including Washington.

In Washington, cuts to mental health services have had immediate consequences. The Governor's across the board cuts announced in October 2010 reduced mental health funding totaling $17.7 million this biennium. These cuts will reduce the availability of crisis and involuntary commitment services, as well as necessary outpatient and medication monitoring services and will force additional closure or reduction in the size of already limited treatment facilities. Just the other day, King County held 38 people with serious mental illnesses in local hospitals because there was absolutely no room at any of our mental health treatment facilities. At Kitsap Mental Health Services we are slated to be cut $817,000 which calls for the elimination of services to over 200 non-Medicaid clients. We are also slated for nearly $40,000 in cuts to children's foster care and our state 211 service has been identified for a reduction of 56 percent.

Cuts in funding for mental health care are only going to be more costly in human and economic terms. Without adequate treatment, people with mental illness will end up in emergency rooms, homeless or in jail, all of which will cost us, the taxpayers, much more in the long run. Our elected officials are fully aware of these consequences and are attempting heroic feats to cobble together a budget to keep our safety net intact. But the Legislature is very limited on what and where the cuts can be made so our community must fully plan for the worst and hope for the best.

Mental health treatment works and it is far more cost efficient and treatment effective to provide mental health services when needed rather than only thinly stretched crisis services. Mental health services need to be available in order to be effective. That is the prime dilemma facing our legislators, our community and our families and friends who are affected by mental illness. Can we truly afford not to have mental health services available?

Joe Roszak, Kitsap Mental Health Services Executive Director