

August 8, 2023

Families of Covenant School Students React to Governor's Call for Special Legislative Session

NASHVILLE—A group of parents of students at The Covenant School in Nashville, which was subject to a mass shooting that killed three students and three staff on March 27, commented on Governor Bill Lee's formal call for a special legislative session for later in August.

Covenant Families Action Fund, a grassroots 501(c)4 organization comprising Covenant parents, staff, and survivors, welcomes the call of the session. The special session has been anticipated for several months and we are glad that the governor and legislature appear to be taking the threats to our communities seriously.

"We are grateful to Governor Lee for following through on his promise to call this special session," said Sarah Shoop Neumann, a mother of a student at The Covenant School. "We plan to review proposals as they come up and endorse specific bills."

The call that was announced with the cooperation of House and Senate legislative leaders is a step in the right direction. Covenant Families Action Fund applauds the focus on mental health, but believes that fully funding mental health professionals and improving the usability of the system for youth and their families must remain the top priority.

The call includes the possibility for the secure storage of firearms. Provided that there is training and flexibility on enforcement, this could be a crucial step on firearm reform. Covenant Families Action Fund also supports steps to improve the Tennessee background check system. We hope that temporary firearm removal, including establishing a judicial mechanism to keep guns away from people in moments of crisis, is also fully considered.

“The special session is a positive step toward keeping the children and citizens of Tennessee safer,” said Melissa Alexander, another parent of a Covenant School student. “The vast majority of Tennesseans support common sense gun safety measures.”

However, the call leaves some possible concerns. Covenant Families Action Fund is concerned about provisions in the announced legislation that may stigmatize certain populations and needs to see how due process is protected for minors and youth. While mental health support is part of reducing gun violence, and we applaud the possible allocation of funds for prevention of suicide and violence, we must be careful not to stigmatize those facing mental health challenges.

“Mental health and firearms safety is not an either/or debate when discussing how to keep our children safe from the threat of violence. It is a both/and conversation,” said David Teague, a parent involved in Covenant Families Action Fund. “We don’t expect the special session to be the end of the debate on keeping our children safe from gun violence; it is just the next chapter. We will be back this January, the January after that, and the January after that.”

Covenant Families also acknowledges the difficulty many schools have in funding their security features, and is grateful for the strong plans in place that saved many lives in the shooting at The Covenant School on March 27, 2023. We encourage the legislature to provide ongoing funding for schools to prepare themselves, especially access to planning for active-shooter situations and plans that encourage staff and students to report possible threats.

“As a follower of Jesus, I have a primary duty to make sure my children and, indeed, all children are made safe at school,” said Kramer Schmidt, another Covenant parent involved in Covenant Families Action Fund. “We didn’t ask for this moment, but we know the special session can bring about much-needed change as we head into another school year. However this change can only occur if policymakers will show up with courage, respect for one another, and keep the focus where it belongs, on the children.”

The members of Covenant Families for Brighter Tomorrows have a wide range of political views but are united in their faith and shared desire to protect their children and all children in Tennessee from experiencing anything like what happened in March 2023. Both Covenant Families for Brighter Tomorrows and the Covenant Families Action Fund appreciate the

decision by Governor Bill Lee to convene a special session of the state legislature in August to respond to overwhelming calls for action on gun violence prevention. The two nonprofits are both dedicated to working with anyone who will respect all political and ideological viewpoints while taking meaningful steps to protect children.

Covenant families have been engaged in 40 days of prayer and reflection at the Capitol leading up to the special session, praying for the Tennessee legislature and seeking wisdom on the best way forward.

Members of Covenant Families for Brighter Tomorrows and the Covenant Families Action Fund are available to speak both with lawmakers ahead of the special legislative session and with the press. For more information, please contact Kathy Chambers of Strategic Principles LLC at kathy@stratprinllc.org.

Covenant Families is not affiliated with The Covenant School or Covenant Church. For more information visit: www.covenantbrightertomorrows.org