Hennepin County Sheriff Rich Stanek and a handful of law enforcement leaders met with President Barack Obama at the White House to discuss mental illness and gun violence last week.

Sheriff Stanek began the meeting in by expressing concerns that he has raised in recent weeks in Minnesota. Among the comments he made in the discussion with President Obama:

“Gun control alone will not solve the complex problem of guns and extreme violence,” said Sheriff Stanek. “We have an access problem. Individuals with severe mental illness should never have access to guns.”

Sheriff Stanek was invited to attend the meeting because of his work as president of the Major County Sheriffs’ Association (MCSA). Also in attendance was Vice President Joe Biden, senior administration officials, and a group of local police chiefs from cities that have been the scenes of recent mass shootings; Minneapolis Police Chief Janee Harteau and the police chiefs from Newtown (CT), Aurora (CO), and Oak Creek (WI). Other law enforcement groups were represented including the Major City Chiefs Association and the National Sheriffs’ Association.

Sheriff Stanek urged President Obama to improve the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS).

“Most Americans believe we have all the disqualifying information and are relying on us to keep prohibited persons from buying/possessing a gun,” said Sheriff Stanek during the meeting, “However, NICS is voluntary. Not all states participate and that needs to change.”

Only 12 states actively upload court mental health records to NICS. There are estimates that only one-quarter of felony convictions are entered into NICS.

After the meeting in the Roosevelt Room of the White House, Sheriff Stanek described the response.

“I am extremely pleased with the positive reaction that I received from the President,” said Sheriff Stanek, “I believe there was broad agreement in the room that actions can be taken right

now to address egregious gaps in the system," said Sheriff Stanek.

In December, Sheriff Stanek met with the Vice President as a member of the law enforcement working group on extreme gun violence in the wake of the Newtown school shootings. Sheriff Stanek described law enforcement and jail professionals as front-line mental health workers and explained that they need access to mental health records for individuals when those records are already public such as court commitment rulings.

Last week at the Minnesota State Capitol, Sheriff Stanek led a group including members of the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association, state lawmakers, judges, prosecutors and mental health advocates in an effort to call for changes in Minnesota to address these issues. Sheriff Stanek and many of the coalition members at that meeting are advocating for improved law enforcement access to mental health records for background checks and for responding to 911 calls. There was also a call to review the state's civil commitment law and to improve resources available to the mentally ill in the community and criminal justice system.
Eight out of nine mass shooters in 2012 incidents had a history of untreated mental illness, including Andrew Engeldinger who shot and killed six people at a Minneapolis business in November.

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