

I appreciate the opportunity to represent the Vermont Chapter of Moms Demand Action. My name is Eileen Barendse, I am a Vermont resident, licensed Vermont educator, and mother of two elementary aged daughters. As I offer this testimony as an advocate for H.230, I would like to take a moment to recognize those reading this testimony that have been impacted by the death by suicide of a family member, friend, or acquaintance.

I would like to speak to suicide prevention in Vermont with a specific focus on reducing access to commonly used methods, but as an educator I am going to offer you the perspective that using data to drive your decision-making and implement changes is necessary for impactful reform.

Within the last ten years, the State of Vermont Agency of Education reframed the “Education Support System” as the “Tiered System of Support”. Now known Multi Tiered Systems of Support, the 2019 VTmtss Field Guide states, “the goal of the Vermont Multi-Tiered System of Supports (VTmtss Framework) is to guide Vermont educators as they work to prevent difficulties and proactively provide appropriate supports so that all students can succeed.”¹ The implementation of MTSS was a response to “the ways that schools have failed to provide effective support for the most vulnerable students and their families”.² The 2019 Field Guide also discusses how researchers O’Day and Smith, in a review of American education equality, “identify specific steps that can be taken to improve outcomes and conclude that ‘many of the ingredients for serious reform exist.’”³

A response to the failure to provide effective support is needed by you now, in order to slow the increasing rate of suicide by firearms in Vermont.

The Vermont Department of Health website reports that in Vermont, 91% of firearm deaths are due to suicide.⁴ According to the Vermont Suicide Prevention Center’s report on suicide in 2020, Vermont has the 18th-highest suicide rate in the nation, and Vermonters have consistently died by suicide at a rate of more than 30% higher than the national average over the last 15 years.⁵ The DOH also reported in its 2019 Vermont

¹ Vermont Agency of Education, “VTmtss Field Guide 2019,” 2019, https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-vtmtss-field-guide-2019_0.pdf

² Vermont Agency of Education, “VTmtss Field Guide 2019.”

³ Vermont Agency of Education, “VTmtss Field Guide 2019.” See also: Jennifer A. O’Day and Marshall S. Smith, “Quality and Equality in American Education: Systemic Problems, Systemic Solutions,” *The Dynamics of Opportunity in America*, March 10, 2016, 297-358, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-25991-8_9

⁴ Vermont Department of Health, “Firearm Injury and Death,” January 2022, <https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSRV-Injury-Firearm-2022.pdf>

⁵ Vermont Suicide Prevention Center, “Suicide in Vermont 2020: What the Data Tells Us,” 2021, <https://vtspc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/VTSPC-Datasheet-Feb2021.pdf>

Youth Risk Behavior Survey that more than one in ten middle school students have ever made a plan about how they would kill themselves.⁶ At the high school age, just over one in ten students made a plan about how they would attempt suicide during the last 12 months.⁷ In the 12 months prior to the report, 7% of high school students attempted suicide.⁸ Suicide attempts for high schoolers nearly doubled from 2009-2019 with a significant increase between 2017-2019.⁹ At the time of this testimony the 2021 YRBS has not yet been published.

According to The Trace's estimates of firearm sales, based on FBI data, people purchased more than 48,000 guns in Vermont in 2022.¹⁰ In the Vermont Department of Health's 2023 "Firearm Storage Safety" publication, it was reported that 44% of Vermont households store at least one firearm in or around the home, with 49% of those households storing their firearm locked and unloaded.¹¹ The remaining 51% of households in Vermont store at least one firearm loaded and/or unlocked.¹² The DOH "Intentional Self Harm and Death by Suicide" data brief from May 2022 reports that in Vermont, firearms account for 52% of suicide deaths.¹³ A key takeaway from the report stated that "suicide and intentional self-harm are preventable public health problems".¹⁴ So how can suicides by firearm be prevented? Research shows that access to a gun triples a person's risk of suicide.¹⁵ This elevated risk of harm applies not only to the gun owner, but to everyone else in the household. Other experts have testified to this committee that approximately one-third of adolescents living in homes with guns can get to a loaded firearm and fire it if needed in less than 5 minutes, and around one-half say within an hour.¹⁶

⁶ Vermont Department of Health, "2019 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey," March 2020, https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/CHS_YRBS_statewide_report.pdf

⁷ Vermont Department of Health, "2019 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey."

⁸ Vermont Department of Health, "2019 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey."

⁹ Vermont Department of Health, "2019 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey."

¹⁰ Daniel Nass and Champe Barton, "How Many Guns Did Americans Buy Last Month?" Jan 6, 2023, <https://www.thetrace.org/2020/08/gun-sales-estimates/>. See "Firearm Sales Estimates By State: Vermont." Sales are estimated.

¹¹ Vermont Department of Health, "Firearm Storage Safety," January 2023, <https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSI-Injury-Firearm-Storage-Safety-2020-Jan-23-Final.pdf>

¹² Vermont Department of Health, "Firearm Storage Safety," January 2023.

¹³ Vermont Department of Health, "Intentional Self-Harm and Death by Suicide," May 2022, <https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSVR-Injury-Suicide-Intentionalself-harm-Brief-2022.pdf>

¹⁴ Vermont Department of Health, "Intentional Self-Harm and Death by Suicide," May 2022.

¹⁵ Andrew Anglemyer, Tara Horvath, and George Rutherford, "The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization Among Household Members: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 160, no. 2 (2014): 101–10, <https://doi.org/10.7326/M13-1301>.

¹⁶ Vermont House Committee on Healthcare, "House Health Care 2-14-2023 - 1:30PM," YouTube, February 14, 2023, video, 57:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvE-VyZmXrg&ab_channel=VermontHouseCommitteeonHealthcare.

Gun manufacturer Smith and Wesson offers this information in a “Safe Gun Storage” video on their website:

- There is a difference between hiding a gun and safely storing it.
- Making the choice NOT to secure your firearm... you increase the odds for an accident to happen.
- Firearms that are not in use should be stored unloaded.
- As an additional safety step store your ammunition separately as well.

A study by David Grossman found that households that locked both firearms and ammunition were associated with a 78 percent lower risk of self-inflicted firearm injuries and an 85 percent lower risk of unintentional firearm injuries among children and teens, compared to those that locked neither.¹⁷

While one neighbor on my Front Porch Forum discussion on gun safety stated “Our statewide numbers are small enough that we don't need national statistics to determine what we can do”, for the sake of providing additional data it should be reported that according to research from Everytown, 350 children under the age of 18 unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else in the U.S. every year.¹⁸ Since 2015 there have been at least 2792 unintentional shootings by children, resulting in 1080 deaths and 1808 injuries nationally.¹⁹

Not all of that data comes from outside of Vermont... On June 26, 2021, a 3-year-old boy in Barre Town unintentionally shot and killed himself in his uncle's girlfriend's home. The gun owner kept two loaded handguns unsecured in soft, unlocked cases inside a bedside table in her bedroom, where the boy accessed one.²⁰ On March 25, 2020, an 8-year-old girl in Cabot was unintentionally shot and wounded by a 3-year old boy when he discharged an unsecured loaded firearm.²¹

¹⁷ David C. Grossman et al., “Gun Storage Practices and Risk of Youth Suicide and Unintentional Firearm Injuries,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 293, no. 6 (2005): 707–14.

¹⁸ Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “#NotAnAccident Index,” <https://everytownresearch.org/maps/notanaccident/>

¹⁹ Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “#NotAnAccident Index,” <https://everytownresearch.org/maps/notanaccident/>, accessed February 21, 2023.

²⁰ Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “#NotAnAccident Index.” See also: Mike Donoghue, “Lawsuit filed in gun death of 3-year-old,” *Rutland Herald*, November 4, 2022, https://www.rutlandherald.com/news/local/lawsuit-filed-in-gun-death-of-3-year-old/article_f3fdb35e-8f4c-571e-ad23-e10361918ddd.html

²¹ Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “#NotAnAccident Index.” See also: Alan J. Keays, “Police say 3-year-old boy accidentally shot 8-year-old girl in Cabot,” *VT Digger*, March 26, 2020, <https://vtdigger.org/2020/03/26/police-say-3-year-old-boy-accidentally-shot-8-year-old-girl-in-cabot/>

Research shows that 90% of suicide attempts with a gun end in death; but without a gun, 4% of suicide attempts result in death.²² We have a saying in education that goes “if it’s predictable, it’s preventable” meaning that if A nearly always results in B, then it’s time for A to change. If suicide attempts with a gun nearly always result in death, then it is time for access to guns to change.

The challenge of creating a multi-tiered approach to suicide prevention and gun prevention in Vermont is both challenging and necessary. Faced with data that proves suicide is on the rise in Vermont,²³ it is not too late to “prevent difficulties and proactively provide appropriate supports.” The data is exhaustive and proves that “many of the ingredients for serious reform exist”. With all the data from experts in Vermont and around the country that statistically prove that reducing access to firearms through secure storage and safe firearm storage sites can reduce suicide by firearm, refusing to adjust to the changing landscape is negligent and harmful to Vermonters.

Thank you. I appreciate your commitment to a healthy Vermont.

Eileen Barendse

Vermont Chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America

²² Andrew Conner, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, “Suicide Case-Fatality Rates in the United States, 2007 to 2014: A Nationwide Population-Based Study,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 171, no. 2 (2019): 885–95, <https://doi.org/10.7326/M19-1324>.

²³ Vermont Department of Health, “Intentional Self-Harm and Death by Suicide,” May 2022, <https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSVR-Injury-Suicide-Intentionalself-harm-Brief-2022.pdf>