



February 21, 2023

Chairwoman Houghton and honorable members of the House Committee on Health Care:

My name is Alison Shih and I serve as Counsel for Everytown for Gun Safety where I'm responsible for supporting state legislative efforts in Vermont. Everytown is the largest gun violence prevention organization in the country, with more than 10 million supporters including moms, mayors, veterans, survivors, gun owners, and everyday Americans fighting for public safety measures that can help save lives. I want to thank you all for allowing me to testify in support of H 230.

We commend Representative Black and the rest of the Committee for proposing concrete solutions to address Vermont's firearm suicide crisis. Nationally, nearly 60% of all firearm deaths are the result of firearm suicide.<sup>1</sup> But the crisis is even more acute in Vermont, where the overwhelming majority of gun deaths—91%—are the result of firearm suicide.<sup>2</sup> And as you've heard extensively in testimony from leading experts who have spoken before the Committee on this bill, we know that one of the most effective ways to save the life of a person in crisis is to put time and space between that person and access to a firearm – preventing them from acting on a suicidal impulse and making a decision they can never take back. The provisions of H 230 would do just that. Because we know that access to a firearm triples the risk of suicide, I believe taking these common-sense steps to limit ready access to firearms for people in crisis will ultimately save lives.

First, we strongly support the firearm storage provision in H 230. Twenty three states and DC have some form of firearm storage law, including every other state in New England. These laws prevent unauthorized gun access by children or people legally prohibited from possessing firearms. And these laws save lives. Storing a gun irresponsibly at home is a risk factor when it comes to having firearms stolen as well as having the gun used in a self-inflicted or unintentional shooting by a child or teenager. One study found that households that locked both firearms and ammunition were associated with a 78% lower risk of self-inflicted firearm injuries and an 85% lower risk of unintentional firearm injuries among children, compared to those that locked neither.<sup>3</sup> Despite this life saving practice, an estimated 4.6 million American children still live in homes with at least one gun that is loaded and unlocked.<sup>4</sup> These laws are the most effective when people are educated about the risks of firearm ownership when children are in the home as

---

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. WONDER Online Database, Underlying Cause of Death. A yearly average was developed using four years of the most recent available data: 2018 to 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Vermont Department of Health, "Firearm Injury and Death," January 2022, <https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSRV-Injury-Firearm-2022.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Miller and Deborah Azrael, "Firearm Storage in US Households with Children: Findings from the 2021 National Firearm Survey," *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 2 (2022): e2148823, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.48823>.



well as a state's firearm storage laws. And this bill builds in processes to ensure this critical public awareness component. Providing information about secure firearm storage with every firearm purchase and to the families of all children enrolled in public schools will help ensure that gun owners understand the importance of responsibly storing their firearms, and ultimately help decrease the number of children who gain access to a firearm. This bill also requires the educational materials to include resources on suicide prevention, so that when someone is in crisis, their loved ones will be empowered with the knowledge of how to get help.

Though your focus for this bill is rightfully on suicide prevention, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that this bill will also keep students, educators, and administrators safer at school. Research suggests that school-age shooters predominantly obtain their guns from family, relatives, or friends—they generally do not purchase them, as they legally cannot. In fact, the US Secret Service has undertaken two studies of targeted school violence, covering nearly 40 years of incidents. They found that three-quarters of school shooters acquired their firearm from the home of a parent or close relative (73 percent in the first study and 76 percent in the second study). The Secret Service's second study of incidents, from 2008 to 2017, revealed that in nearly half of the shootings, the firearm was easily accessible or was not stored securely.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, we strongly support the provision that will require a 72 hour waiting period before transferring a firearm to a purchaser. Amongst commonly used methods of self-harm, firearms are by far the most lethal, with a fatality rate of approximately 90%.<sup>6</sup> Only 4% of people who attempt suicide by other methods will die<sup>7</sup>, and the vast majority of those who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide.<sup>8</sup> Creating a buffer between temporary suicidal ideation and firearm access can be the difference between life and death. Waiting period laws do just that, and are associated with reduced suicide rates—something we're grateful that Vermont, in particular, would address by enacting H 230.

After passing legislation to address the Charleston Loophole last year, which provided more time for a background check to be completed before a firearm is transferred in what's known as the "default proceed" period, a waiting period provision is a natural and similarly important next step for Vermont. Because while addressing the Charleston Loophole meant that some gun buyers with complicated records would have to wait several days before completing their sale, that policy is solely about giving background check operators the necessary time to determine if a person is prohibited. By contrast, a waiting period applies to all gun buyers, including those whose background checks are completed in a matter of minutes (as the majority of checks are).

---

<sup>5</sup> National Threat Assessment Center, "Protecting America's Schools: A US Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence," US Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2U7vnwa>.

<sup>6</sup> 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>.

<sup>7</sup> 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>.

<sup>8</sup> David Owens, Judith Horrocks, and Allan House, "Fatal and Non-Fatal Repetition of Self-Harm: Systematic Review," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 181, no. 3 (2002): 193-99, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.181.3.193>.



This will provide a “cooling off” period for people who might reconsider their intentions in the interim. Nine states and DC have waiting period laws, including the nearby states of Rhode Island and New Jersey.<sup>9</sup> The waiting period lengths range from 3 days to 14 days. Between 2013 and 2014, these laws were correlated with a decrease in suicide rates in the states with mandatory waiting periods laws, while states without these laws saw an increase in suicide rates over the same time period.<sup>10</sup> Several states require buyers to obtain a permit before purchasing a firearm or handgun, and in these states, the processing time for the permit approval process creates a cooling off period similar to a waiting period for buyers. These states include Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, and Maryland. We know that when someone is considering suicide, minutes, hours and days matter, and waiting periods can save lives.

Lastly, we strongly support the expansion of eligible petitioners for Vermont’s Extreme Risk Protection Order (“ERPO”) law to family and household members. When someone is in crisis, loved ones are often the first to identify signs of crisis. ERPO is an important tool that empowers loved ones to seek help from a court to help temporarily separate a person in crisis from firearms. And indeed these laws have saved lives. After Connecticut increased enforcement of its red flag law, the law was associated with a 13.7% decrease in the state’s firearm suicide rate.<sup>11</sup> Another study estimated that one suicide was averted for every 10 to 11 gun removals carried out under the law.<sup>12</sup> Indiana’s red flag law was associated with a 7.5% decrease in the state’s firearm suicide rate.<sup>13</sup> Several states, like Vermont, that have existing ERPO laws have expanded eligible petitioners to family, dating partners, or former spouses with children in common, including Connecticut, California, and Illinois. Several other states and DC included family and household members as eligible petitioners when first enacting their ERPO laws. It’s a common sense way to ensure that loved ones have a tool they can use to help save the life of a person in crisis.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify in support of this important legislation. I am grateful for your efforts to address the epidemic of firearm suicide in Vermont in these targeted and highly effective ways.

---

<sup>9</sup> CA, FL, HI, IL, MD, MN, NJ, RI, WA

<sup>10</sup> Michael D. Anestis, Joye C. Anestis, and Sarah E. Butterworth, “Handgun Legislation and Changes in Statewide Overall Suicide Rates,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 4 (April 2017): 579–81, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303650>.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron J. Kivisto and Peter Lee Phalen, “Effects of Risk-Based Firearm Seizure Laws in Connecticut and Indiana on Suicide Rates, 1981–2015,” *Psychiatric Services* 69, no. 8 (August 2018): 855–62, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201700250>.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey W. Swanson et al., “Implementation and Effectiveness of Connecticut’s Risk-Based Gun Removal Law: Does It Prevent Suicides?” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 80 (2017): 179–208.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey W. Swanson et al., “Criminal Justice and Suicide Outcomes with Indiana’s Risk-Based Gun Seizure Law,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 47, no. 2 (June 2019): 188–97.