



Vermont Chapter

May 6, 2013

Dear Vermont State Representative:

This letter was written and circulated well ahead of the April 17th votes in the United States Senate. Our resolve to prevent gun violence is as strong as ever.

As physicians who provide medical care for Vermont's children, we feel a professional and moral obligation to speak out regarding gun violence prevention. The horrific shootings of 20 young children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook School in Newtown, CT have led to new calls for preventive action nationally— but we must recognize that even in our small mostly-rural state we have seen far too much preventable gun violence. In fact, national data show that Vermont's firearm death rate (all ages) is very close to those of Illinois and California (*National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC, data from 1999-2010*). The large majority of our firearm deaths occur as *suicides*, but we have numerous cases of homicide (mostly in cases of domestic violence) and occasional accidental shooting deaths as well. Vermont and Maine have the highest youth firearm suicide rates among all northeast states. All of these deaths affect loved ones, friends and families, including children.

We recognize that large numbers of Vermonters own and use guns for legitimate purposes including hunting and sport shooting, and sometimes for self-defense – and that the vast majority of Vermont gun-owners are meticulous in their attention to safety. At the same time, we are convinced by decades of research and experience that in some cases we could do a better job, at both the personal and public level, of safeguarding our children. We believe in the public health approach to gun violence prevention, which seeks *proactive* measures that can balance the freedom to keep and bear arms with support for education and policies that can help keep all citizens safe from gun violence.

Specifically, we call on our leaders to:

- Guarantee that all purchases and transfers of ownership of weapons outside of families are carried out with appropriate Background Checks;
- Seek ways to enhance the effectiveness of background checks, for example by requiring that domestic partners or spouses of prospective purchasers are notified of the intent to buy a gun;
- Support better funding and improved access to mental health care;
- Find ways to improve the respectful identification of those with specific mental illness conditions and instability that make it unsafe for them to own weapons, so that background checks can prevent them from obtaining firearms;
- Clarify the responsibility of gun owners regarding safe storage of guns in homes where children live or visit, such that if a child gains access to a recklessly stored firearm and causes or threatens injury, the owner is held appropriately accountable;

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- Limit the ability of people to gain access to or use highly lethal military-style weapons, either by reinstating the Assault Weapons Ban in a strengthened form for greater effectiveness, and/or by banning the sale of high-capacity magazines;
- Increase enforcement of laws against gun-trafficking and “straw purchases”;
- Reverse the federal restrictions imposed since 1997 that have impeded public health research on firearm injuries, their causes and prevention; and
- Support educational and research efforts to address root causes of violence, including those related to poverty, violence in the media, and substance use and abuse.

Sincerely,

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