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Vermont restricting domestic abusers' access to guns

By WILSON RING - *Associated Press* - Saturday, February 6, 2016

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) - The need to protect potential victims in domestic violence cases helped lead the Vermont Legislature, which traditionally has been reluctant to restrict gun ownership, to take first steps toward making it harder for people with violent histories to get firearms.

During the past two years, the state passed two laws, one prohibiting individuals convicted of domestic assault, stalking, sexual assault and aggravated assault crimes from possessing guns and one setting up a system to store firearms that had been confiscated in domestic abuse cases.

It's part of a trend that has seen more than a dozen states strengthen laws over the past two years to keep firearms out of the hands of domestic abusers, a rare area of consensus in the nation's highly polarized debate over guns.

"We're seeing our politicians, our state leaders, are coming around to this, too. Throughout the state, for a long time guns were the third rail that you do not touch," said Ann Braden, the president of Gun Sense Vermont, which has been pushing for such laws since its creation less than three years ago.

Nationwide, the push is driven by stories of women and children killed or wounded by known abusers, and by statistics showing that hostile relationships often turn deadly when guns are present. In Vermont between 2006 and 2014, there were 15 domestic violence-related firearm homicides in the state, according to statistics compiled by The Associated Press.

An average of 690 Americans were killed with guns annually by spouses, ex-spouses or dating partners between 2006 and 2014, according to an analysis of FBI data by the AP. That figure is an undercount because not all departments report such information, and it doesn't include children and other bystanders who were killed. More than 80 percent of those killed were women.

The main piece of legislation in Vermont, Act 14, was signed by Gov. Peter Shumlin last spring. It outlined instances in which people convicted of violent crimes are prohibited under state law from possessing firearms.

Auburn Watersong, the associate director of public policy for the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, told lawmakers last month that between 1994 and 2014, 57 percent of all domestic violence related homicides in Vermont were committed with firearms.

"We're taking steps," Watersong said. "It's a challenge, but I think we'll get there."

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