

Dear Senator Richard Sears, Senator Alice Nitka, Senator Jeanette White, Senator Tim Ashe, and Senator Joe Benning,

This statement is my testimony for S.6, S.221 and H.422, measures that would make our state safer. I send it because I will be away from Friday, Feb. 23rd, through Friday, March 2nd, to celebrate my granddaughter Lilly's 7th birthday in California.

I emailed you recently a fact sheet on background checks that highlight their proven benefits. The Fair Haven episode showed us we must consider the possibility of an unimaginable tragedy erupting in our beloved Vermont, and put safeguards in place to address such possibilities.

Every Newtown, Columbine, and Orlando rips into me and reawakens a painful memory: My two daughter Clare and Kate survived an armed assault in their school nearly 30 years ago. (Clare is the mother of my granddaughter Lilly.) This nightmare happened in Winnetka, IL. One child, Nicky Corwin, was killed, and five others were wounded, but my kids were spared. Only dumb luck saved them. We need better than dumb luck.

Five years have passed since a deeply troubled young man shot his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 26 people, yet we don't run background checks on all gun purchases. That bothers me. Eighty-nine percent of Americans support it, Vermonters and gun owners, too. Instead, prayers are said after every mass shooting, but little changes to make us safer.

Maybe you know some of the facts that define the grim reality of gun violence: 89 Americans are killed daily by firearms, eight of them children. Three times that number survive, crippled for life. Per year, more than 30,000 die from gunfire (Source: CDC). More preschoolers in America were shot dead in 2013 than police officers killed in the line of duty (Source: CDC and the FBI). The U.S. averages more than one mass shooting per day, in which four or more people are killed (Source: Shootingtracker.com). In fact, more Americans have been killed here by bullets since 1970 than Americans who died in all our wars going back to the American Revolution (Source: NY TIMES, 10/14/15, "Sunday Review", page 9, "A New Way to Tackle Gun Deaths").

Vermont isn't immune to gun violence. From 1994 to 2014, over half of our homicides were domestic violence and 57% (71 victims) were killed by guns (Source: State of Vermont Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission Report for 2015). Sadly, too, we lead the entire North East in your

firearm suicide death rate (Source: CDC); and our firearm death rate—the CDC’s figure that combines homicides, suicides and accidental shootings per 100,000 of population—is nearly three times higher than Massachusetts. Additionally, due to our lax gun laws, Vermont exports a disturbing rate of guns later used in crimes in nearby states. Those Vermont firearms are often the medium of exchange for heroin, which then fuel our drug problem (Source: ATF); so, we have work to do.

Pull back and look at the bigger picture. We won’t stop all shootings, no more than speed limits or drunk driving laws will end highway deaths, but we can lower death and injury. One clear way is to require stronger background checks anytime a firearm is purchased. Don’t we check backgrounds now? We do up to a point, and then we don’t. Its complicated, due to compromises demanded by the gun lobby. Let me explain.

Federal law requires licensed gun dealers—that is, those whose primary business is firearms—to run checks on all gun sales. This only accounts for 60% of transactions. The remaining 40% represents 6.7 million guns sold in 2012. In the 20-plus years that the National Instant Check System (NICS) has existed, more than two million potential buyers were denied due to criminal histories. Typically a check takes less than five minutes, and some 95% of buyers pass; it’s those 5% who have sketchy backgrounds that stall. Some say the bad apples will just go to the black market. Does that mean we should allow any felon or violent domestic abuser to be able to purchase a gun legally?

Even in Vermont, violent people know how to navigate a flawed system. Consider convicted felon Timothy O’Keefe who, during a phone call from jail to his son Alex, instructed his son to purchase a gun for him when he was released. Do it “...privately,” O’Keefe said, “not at a gun store, and not to register it so no one will know” (Source: Affidavit, Sergeant Mark Carnigan, Brattleboro Police Dept., July 1, 2014). O’Keefe’s intent came later on in that same phone call: “There are going to be no more warnings and I’m just going to start shooting people when I get out of jail”. Fortunately, police monitored that call, and the sale never happened.

Consider how easily Paul Heinz, the SEVEN DAYS reporter, bought an assault rifle legally through a private seller just hours after the Orlando nightclub tragedy, the largest mass shooting in U.S. history at that time (49 were killed and 53 wounded) until the Las Vegas blood bath. Heinz purchased this firearm, identical to the one used in Orlando, in a South Burlington parking lot, and then later that day surrendered it to the Burlington Police. In the hands of a determined felon like Tim O’Keefe, that simple and legal transaction turns fatal and tragic.

Some argue that Vermont hasn't had a Newtown, we know how to be responsible with firearms. For the most part, that's true, until it isn't. Recall that tragic day in August of 2015 when DCF social worker Lara Sobel was gunned down in a Barre parking lot by Jody Herring who, earlier the same day, murdered two cousins and an aunt. Or what might have happened in Fair Haven if the courageous young woman hadn't stepped forward to tip off local authorities.

If you'd told me the day before the crime at my kids' school what could happen, I might have doubted you. I've learned it can happen anywhere. Since Columbine, schools have beefed up security, run intruder drills, and practice safety protocols. We've taken these steps inside school, but outside schools it makes sense to implement stronger background checks and other life-saving measures.

Nineteen states and Washington, D.C., now have extended background checks. Data from these sources provide a significant sample pool that shows their life-saving benefits:

- * 38% fewer women are shot dead by their intimate partner (Source: Dept. of Justice, FBI, Supplementary Homicide Reports, 2011). That statistic alone should get our attention, given that half of Vermont's homicides are domestic violence, and 57% of those murders are carried out with a firearm.
- * The firearm suicide rate is 49% lower, even though non-firearm suicide rates are nearly identical (Source: CDC, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (WISQARS) (online), 2005).
- * Gun trafficking—that is, the interstate migration of guns to crimes in other states—drops 48% (Source: Daniel Webster, Jon Vernik and Maria Bulzacchelli, "Effects of State-Level-Firearm Seller Accountability Policies on Firearm Trafficking," JOURNAL OF URBAN HEALTH, July 2009).

* 39% fewer law enforcement officers are shot to death with handguns

(Source: FBI, 2001-2011: Law enforcement killed with handguns not their own).

Newtown was the 9/11 for parents all across our nation: it rattled our complacency and altered our schools forever. And Parkland has mobilized students like never before. One Parkland student, Daniel Hogg, interviewed classmates with his phone while they huddled inside a closet as the shooter blasted away outside. Daniel did this because he wanted their words to survive them—in the event they were all killed—so their words would motivate others to act. I saw that same spirit and commitment on Tuesday, Feb. 20th, on the Statehouse steps, as students from Montpelier and Burlington stood out in the rain and spoke to the 400 Vermonters gathered there to encourage lawmakers to pass S.6, S.221 and H.422. The time to act is now.

Thank you for your thoughtful attention and for all you do on behalf of Vermont.

Sincerely,

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