

Testimony of Mary Cox, before the House Judiciary Committee, April 2, 2019

Hello, I am Mary Cox. I am a member of NAMI Vermont, part of America's largest grassroots mental health organization, the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

I am here today to support Senate Bill S.169, Firearms Procedures, asking you to support reasonable restrictions on firearms, and specifically providing for a waiting period for sales of handguns.

I am speaking today as the sister of a kind and gentle brother, filled with sunshine, who experienced a late-onset serious mental illness and ultimately committed suicide 19 years ago; as the mother of a smart, kind, and wonderful young man who is recovering from a serious mental illness; and as a 27-year veteran of the Coast Guard and Coast Guard Reserve.

Although my brother did not commit suicide by means of a firearm, his death could have been avoided had we known then what we know today about helping people with mental health challenges, including mental health first aid, community support services, and suicide prevention efforts. Being helpless in the face of an unfathomable mental illness, not being able to find or access help, failing to put my foot down to demand help before he took his life; these things have tortured and haunted me through the years.

When my son was first hospitalized with a serious mental illness 9 years ago, my immediate thoughts were the terrifying and horrific fate of my brother. My primary focus has been to help my son heal and stay safe through my love and substantial community supports.

Having experienced the loss of a loved one to suicide, it has broken my heart in recent years to learn about the high suicide rates among my fellow veterans, my brothers and sisters in service to this country. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reported that **about 20 veterans per day take their own lives**. In that same year, veterans accounted for 14% of all suicide deaths in the U.S. Rises in suicide rates among young veterans between the ages of 18 and 34 have been particularly prevalent between 2006 and 2016.¹

Nationally, 69% of Veterans' suicides are by means of firearms.²

Tragically, the Vermont Veteran suicide rate, at 56.8, is significantly higher than both the Northeast rate of 23.9 and the national rate of 30.1. The attached data sheet from the Department of Veterans Affairs gives a chilling snapshot of Vermont Veteran suicides.

We can, and should, increase our commitment to provide Vermont Veterans with the help and support they need to fully recover from trauma experienced in service, and live long, happy, and healthy lives. The same sorts of things that help individuals with mental illnesses can also help Veterans; most importantly, strong community support systems.

Providing a reasonable waiting period for purchase of a firearm can be pivotal. It is not widely understood that **9 out of 10 people who attempt suicide unsuccessfully do not go on to commit suicide at a later date.**³

However, a suicide attempt involving a firearm is almost always successful.⁴ When a firearm is easily available during a crisis, we lose the opportunity to help and support a family member, a friend, a Veteran, to a better path.

¹L. Shane III, "VA suicide rates for younger veterans increased by more than 10 percent," Military Times, Sept. 26, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2018/09/26/suicide-rate-spikes-among-youngerveterans/>

² U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2018 updates; https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp

³ Owens, D., Horrocks, J., & House, A. (2002, September 01). Fatal and non-fatal repetition of self-harm: Systematic review. Retrieved August 30, 2017, from <http://bjp.rcpsych.org/content/181/3/193.long>

⁴ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/case-fatality/>

I ask you, and the entire Legislature, to pass S. 169, providing for reasonable restrictions on firearms and a reasonable waiting period on sales of firearms.

Thank you for listening to me. **Please help me, and other Vermont families and Veterans, by passing S.169.**