



TESTIMONY OF CLAI LASHER-SOMMERS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR – GUN SENSE VERMONT
House Judiciary Committee
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Chair Grad and members of the Committee, my name is Clai Lasher-Sommers, and I am the Executive Director of GunSense Vermont.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. GunSense Vermont is a growing coalition of citizens that has worked on gun violence prevention since 2012. We understand that there is no other threat to public health and safety in the United States that looms as large as gun violence.

As the Executive Director of GunSense Vermont, I want to thank you for your leadership and your hard work on Gun Violence Prevention policy last year. As a survivor of gun violence, I am especially grateful to you all for the continued effort to enact common sense gun violence prevention measures. This work is difficult, and can come at a price, as we have recently seen; in the past eight days, two students from Parkland who survived the massacre there took their lives by gun. On Monday, my friend and colleague Jeremy Richman, also took his own life. His 6-year-old daughter, Avielle, was murdered in the Sandy Hook shooting. These tragic deaths are stark reminders that the pain of gun violence lingers long after the initial shots are fired. Survivors and whole communities live with the repercussions always.

The enactment last year of an expanded background check law was a crucial piece of public health policy, and S.169 builds upon that basic gun violence prevention law with the understanding of gun violence as a public health problem. It is important to note that gun violence is not limited to mass shootings and random homicides. In Vermont, we are impacted daily by gun violence in the forms of suicide and domestic violence where guns are involved.

In the United States, half of all suicides are carried out with a firearm. In Vermont, that number is even higher, with guns being used 60% of the time. When compared to other means of attempting suicide, guns are by far the most lethal. Most people who attempt suicide do not die - unless they use a gun. Across all suicide attempts not involving a firearm, less than 5 percent will result in death. But for gun suicides, those statistics are flipped: approximately 85 percent of gun suicide attempts end in death. It is crucial to note that approximately 90% of people who survive a suicide attempt go on to live out their lives and do not subsequently die by suicide. When a gun is involved, people rarely have that opportunity. The lethality of the means matters, and guns are the most lethal means by orders of magnitude.

It's often said that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Waiting periods may help prevent firearm suicides by delaying firearm acquisition. In delaying immediate access to a firearm, waiting periods insert a buffer between impulse and action, and are essential in providing short but valuable time. Time for someone to rethink what they are about to do. Time for them to reach out to someone and get help. Time for a parent or family

member to notice the signs. Time for law enforcement to complete a thorough background check. Time that every parent who has lost a child to suicide wishes they had been given.

Policies that create this short buffer of time are associated with reduced rates of firearm suicide and reduced rates of suicide overall. According to the Giffords Law Center, states with waiting period laws for gun purchases have lower rates of suicide. Research published in the American Journal of Public Health showed that states with waiting period laws had 51% fewer firearm suicides and a 27% lower overall suicide rate than states without such laws.¹² When South Dakota repealed its 48-hour waiting period for handgun purchases in 2009, overall suicides the following year increased by 7.6%.¹³

My testimony supports S.169, and I encourage you to improve this important bill by creating a 3-day waiting period law universal to all firearms. This is in keeping with House Bill 159. We are concerned that the waiting period in S.169 only covers handguns because the reality in Vermont is that many of the guns used in suicides are long guns--both rifles and shotguns. According to a major study conducted by Vermont Public Radio, between 2011 and 2017 there were 433 suicides involving firearms. The data shows that 271 used a handgun and 153 used a long gun. You can see this compelling information at this link:

<http://projects.vpr.net/gunshots-Vermont-gun-data>

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vWqarUlgltl1zwudyn8HcyAgGyqglarojPdxwzsYaAI/htmlview#>

The statistics in this study gathered from the Department of Health Certificates of Death clearly show us people are using long guns a third of the time. When looking at the numbers and descriptions straight off the death certificates, it becomes clear that this law should cover all firearms sales, not just handguns.

We look to H.159 as the model for both the scope (all firearms sales) and the length (3 days) of a reasonable and effective waiting period law.

States that have waiting period laws ranging from 3 to 14 days have lower rates of suicide. In our view, a 72-hour waiting period will help not just with suicide by firearm, but also is imperative in cases of domestic violence. We know that the first days after leaving an abusive partner are the most dangerous for the victim. We also know that the risk of death for the victim rises by a factor of five when the abuser has access to a gun (American Journal of Public Health, 2003 July, 93/7).

Finally, we are inspired by H.203, an act relating to the negligent storage of firearms. Guns in homes pose a clear risk to the safety of our children other people's children. When those guns are not stored safely and securely, the risk drastically increases and all too often results in unintentional discharges. Safe Storage laws hold gun owners accountable for the safe storage of firearms, imposing liability for failing to take simple yet important measures to prevent children from accidentally using a gun.

I'm grateful that today in Vermont we have the opportunity to pass lifesaving legislation. Working on gun violence prevention public policy takes courage. Thank you for being courageous.

Thank you for listening to my testimony, and inviting me here today.