

**Senator Ruth Hardy**

**Testimony on S.22 – A bill on purchase waiting periods and safe storage of firearms**

**Senate Judiciary Committee**

**March 13, 2019**

Thank you to the committee for providing me with the opportunity to testify on S.22 which would require a waiting period and safe storage for firearms. It was the first bill I worked on after my election last November. My desire to help ensure Vermont has common sense gun safety laws was one motivation for why I ran for office. I approach this desire for change from a variety of perspectives.

I grew up in a family that owned guns. My father learned to use a gun growing up in rural upstate New York. My brother hunted water fowl and practiced target shooting in our hay field. Just last year, I myself ventured into skeet shooting, and I'm a pretty decent shot. I'm supportive of a person's ability to safely own and enjoy using a gun for sport and hobby. I know that the vast majority of Vermont gunowners are safe and responsible.

I am a former school board member who, in the name of protecting students from gun violence, discussed safety plans and training with administrators, added funding to budgets to support safety-related upgrades to buildings, and deliberated with colleagues about the proper consequences for students who brought weapons to school.

I am an advocate for women's rights and safety. We have seen in Vermont and nationwide, that guns are often used as weapons of fear and control against women in domestic violence situations. Access to a gun in a domestic violence situation makes it five times more likely that a woman will be killed.

Most importantly, I am the mother of three teenage children who are growing up in an era when firearms are the second leading cause of death for American children and teens, and learning how to protect yourself from an active shooter at school is now a required part of the curriculum.

My youngest child was in 1st grade at the time of the Newtown school shooting, the same age as the children killed. That tragedy devastated me as a mother. That was the first time I contacted my elected officials asking them to improve our gun safety laws. Two years later, when my oldest child was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, one of her classmates committed suicide with a gun he accessed at his own home. From 2011-2016, 16 teenagers in Vermont committed suicide using a gun.

Last year, I brought students to the statehouse on several occasions to testify in committees and speak with legislators about their experiences growing up in this reality and why they support common sense gun safety laws. I'm grateful that the governor and legislature finally decided to act.

I think there is more to do, and that is why I worked with Senators Baruth and Clarkson to introduce S.22. During the time we were drafting the bill, a young man committed suicide in Chittenden County. His parents called for a waiting period before the purchase of a firearm, so others who are rashly buying guns to take their lives would have to wait, what could be a life-saving two days, before obtaining a gun.

During the time we were drafting the bill, two eighth grade boys at my youngest child's school, the Middlebury Union Middle School, discussed with friends their plan to steal guns from a relative and

bring them to school to shoot a classmate they disliked. Their plan was halted because one of their friends told his mother and she reported it to school officials.

Following this incident, just weeks after I was elected, I was on the phone a lot with worried parents, stressed school officials, and diligent law enforcement officers. I was also dealing with the stress and fear of my own kids, knowing that this type of thing could happen in their own school, with kids they knew. My son, who was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade during Newtown, was now in 7<sup>th</sup> grade when it almost happened in his town.

One constituent who contacted me with suggestions for S.22 said: "I own a few guns and like to shoot and hunt. I don't have an issue with reasonable restrictions and as a father of two kids you better believe I keep my guns locked up! The thing at the middle school actually made me go out and get new locks for all of them." Unfortunately, not all guns are safely stored, and some can be accessed by people who mean to do harm to themselves or others. Some can be accessed by kids too young to know better.

Waiting periods and safe storage work hand-in-hand. If guns are safely stored, then most people who shouldn't have access to them, including people who want to do harm to themselves or others, can't get them. And, if there are waiting periods for people to buy guns, then most people who shouldn't have access to them, including people who want to do harm to themselves or others, can't get them.

I respect the committee process in the Vermont legislature. I know how hard my committees work to improve the bills sent to us before we send them back out. I know that some portions of bills get removed so that others may advance. I understand that the waiting period language may be more palatable to members of the committee than the safe storage language. But I believe they work best together.

There is sufficient technology to allow gun owners the ability to easily access their own guns, while also keeping them locked away from those who shouldn't have them. There is language to more precisely define locking devices and storage compartments that would do away with ambiguity. There are mechanisms for smoothly completing a purchase transaction 48 hours after it is initiated.

There are some who say that safe storage laws are not enforceable and therefore we shouldn't have them. But in talking with a law enforcement officer in my community, he told me that there are numerous laws that in most cases are unenforceable. He said that in his opinion though, laws are a "statement of what the community regards as acceptable."

I know that our community regards the safe storage of guns acceptable. Most Vermonters support common sense gun laws. The voters of my district elected me knowing that I would advocate for gun safety legislation. I know that kids are watching our action to see what we as adults, what we as the leaders of Vermont regard as acceptable. I believe that keeping students safe in school, women safe in their homes, and people who are struggling safe from themselves is what is most acceptable. As one of your newest colleagues, I am asking you to support both a 48-hour waiting period and safe storage. Thank you for your time and your work.