

Theresa Utton-Jerman

Subject: Testimony on Governor's FY22 Budget

To the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations:

Mine is a cautionary tale, one I hope you will take into account in your budget discussions.

My name is Tomra Vecere, I am a resident of Manchester Center, a NAMI advocate and volunteer, and a suicide loss survivor.

I grew up with hunters. My brother, grandfather, uncle, father, and cousins hunted moose, deer, squirrel, and rabbits. They would spot at night, plan where to set up stands, and clean their guns for weeks before hunting season started. My grandfather was a huge proponent of gun safety, or so I thought at the time. "You check your gun before you leave the house, before you put it in the vehicle, when you take it out of the vehicle....." I heard the story so many times of the time he was shocked to find his rifle loaded, as careful as he was. When you walked by the gun cabinet in the house as a child, you could feel his eyes on you, and there was an imaginary arc around the gun cabinet you dared to step into.

I never saw these guns as any more than what they were used for, hunting game. When these guns came into my possession after my grandfather died, I was informed some of them were from the first world war, and most of them should be "hangers," too old to take a chance on using them. My ancestors had used them to feed their family and defend their country, they had been modified and used extensively.

My father was diagnosed as bipolar in his twenties, and suffered with suicidal ideation his entire life. My grandfather told me he knew my father was suicidal before his last and final attempt, because he had lined up all of his excavation equipment. It is only now, twenty years later, that I wonder why no one thought to secure our firearms. Never did I imagine that my brother would have to take his own hunting rifle out of our father's hands, somehow also still holding a lit cigarette.

I heard testimony this week to the Vermont legislature that General Physicians are uncomfortable talking to their patients about suicide and lethal means. This is an example of something that needs to be funded by the legislature, a campaign to educate doctors and the public about this conversation. I am sure there are many Vermonters out there like me, looking at their hunting rifles as just that, never thinking someone might turn that gun on themselves. Research has proven that restricting access to lethal means in a time of crisis is effective in reducing suicide. 88% of gun deaths in Vermont are suicides. We need to start talking about all of these issues, and the legislature needs to fund the framework and outreach to make it happen. Please make mental health the priority it needs to be, as everyone in the field knows the mental health crisis is simmering as the pandemic drags on.

Thank you for your time

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