

To: House Judiciary Committee, Vermont State Legislature
From: Martha L. VanderWolk, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, Norwich University/Union Institute & University
Date: January 13, 2022
Re: S.30

I am writing to you today as a hunter and gun owner in support of S.30.

While I did not grow up in a house with guns, I have spent the last 50 years of my life with guns in my house and raised three sons to respect them and use them properly. Over those years, I have been married to three Vietnam veterans, one of who was a Master Maine Guide and one of whom suffered from PTSD.

In my house, guns and ammo were always stored separately. And guns were always unloaded and double-checked before being brought inside. My boys knew that if they so much as opened the breach of a gun inside or didn't take care to know exactly where a gun was pointed at all times, their hunting privileges would be taken away for a month. When they went to hunter safety, they were appalled at how carelessly other people, even the instructors, handled guns.

Charleston Loophole:

It has always been interesting to me that hunters are more highly regulated by the State than people who just want to own guns, even though, in general, guns used for hunting (shotguns and single shot long rifles with limited magazines) are less deadly to humans than handguns and semiautomatic rifles with large magazines. Hunters must not only buy licenses in order to use their guns for their intended purpose, they must also complete a hunter safety course. The State finances a whole police force, Fish and Game Wardens, to police the use of guns for hunting in order to protect the animals of our state. (Or at least that was their purpose before the advent of off-road vehicles and their transformation to backwoods traffic cops.) Yet there is no licensing, training or policing of the people who use guns for other purposes, including their use against other humans. The least we can do to stop the spread of gun violence against other humans is to close the "Charleston loophole" and make sure that guns do not get into the hands of those who legally are not allowed to have them.

Hospitals and the State Capitol as gun-free zones:

I have always been proud of the fact that Vermont has an open carry law while still having a very low rate of gun violence. Vermonters, historically, are responsible gun owners. This seems to be changing. I do not advocate doing away with our open carry status, but there are places where guns should never be allowed, where people should always be able to feel safe from gun violence or intimidation. Putting hospitals and the State Capitol complex on the list of "safe spaces", along with schools and churches, is only commonsense. Doctors, nurses and politicians should be able to do their jobs without fear of someone violently objecting, and sick patients should always be kept safe from harm.

ERPOs:

Let me tell you about the time I came home from work late at night to be met at my bedroom door by a very large man holding a shotgun and demanding to know "Who goes there?!" It was because my husband was a responsible gun owner that I was not afraid that he would shoot me by mistake. I knew that, while he had had time to grab a gun when he awoke to hear someone entering the house, he had not had time to find the separately-stored ammunition and load the gun. Given his half-asleep state and obvious PTSD-inspired reaction, it was unlikely that he would even have realized that he might have had to do that. In that state, he would not have realized that the gun wasn't loaded. It might have been otherwise.

While none of the veterans I have lived with were ever suicidal, it would not have been surprising if one or more of them had been. None of them were ever violent towards myself or my children, but I consider myself lucky in that regard. Veterans in particular suffer from high rates of PTSD and are trained in the use of firearms. Their suicide and domestic violence rates are also higher than the general public. While they should always have the same rights to own and use firearms as everyone else, those whose PTSD is significant enough that they are under the care of a mental health professional can be unpredictable. The mental health professionals who treat people with severe PTSD or other mental health issues that might make them a danger to themselves or others are in the best position to determine if they are, indeed, so potentially dangerous that they should not have access to firearms, at least until they are out of crisis.

As a teacher, I have long been a “mandatory reporter” of potential child abuse. Mental health professionals should have the same obligation to report potential suicides or domestic violence associated with firearms under the ERPO option.

All of the provisions that you are debating today are just commonsense measures to protect the public—as well as gun owners themselves and their families. They do not abridge a person's right to “keep and bear arms” anymore than hunting laws do. They just offer some simple protections to innocent people from people who should not, by law, have access to lethal weapons and in places where they should always feel safe to do their jobs or just be without threats of violence.