

1/13/2022

House Judiciary Committee

Re: Testimony on S.30 with proposed amendments

Chairwoman Grad and Committee members,

Thank you Representative Grad for allowing me to speak today to the members of the House Judiciary committee. My name is Seton Mcilroy. I live in Woodstock with my husband and 2 kids. I serve on the Village Board of Trustees and am a volunteer with the Vermont chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. I am speaking today in strong support of S. 30, sponsored by Senator Baruth, as well as Representative Notte's proposed amendments to the bill.

In a state with high gun ownership and overarching respect for firearms, a value passed down from generation to generation, we have made many strides to pass gun safety measures that embrace this respect while ensuring safer communities. There is still work to be done though, and I thank the legislature for continuing to have these important discussions by bringing this sensible bill up in Committee today.

First, I'd like to start with some background on gun deaths in Vermont. Every year, an average of 64 people in Vermont die by gun suicides, which is more than 50% of suicides overall in Vermont. Our state has the 15th-highest rate of gun suicides and gun suicide attempts in the US. This is why the Moms Demand Action chapter in Vermont has centered our advocacy and education program on the intersection of suicide and gun violence. As a member of the Vermont Suicide Prevention Coalition, I have heard VT experts talk about the connection between our suicide rates and the easy to firearms in our state. It is imperative we continue to provide tools to ensure guns don't fall into the hands of dangerous people and to help communities respond to those who may become a risk to themselves or others.

Thankfully, you all took action in 2018 by enacting Extreme Risk Protection Orders, or ERPOs, which have been shown to help prevent gun suicides. 61 ERPO petitions were filed in Vermont between the time the law took effect in 2018 through the end of 2020. Usage of the law has increased each year as people have become more aware of its availability. Representative Notte's amendment, through its data collection and reporting piece, will provide an even deeper understanding of the use of Vermont's existing ERPO law and I hope that it helps guide Vermont to eventually expand the ability of family and friends to petition the courts directly.

Additionally, I support S.30's prohibition on guns in hospitals. The presence of guns in hospitals makes us all less safe and adds an additional burden of concern to our health care workers that have faced so many challenges during the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, Rep. Nottle's proposed amendments seek to close the hole in our background check system known as the "Charleston Loophole". This gap in our federal law allows a gun sale to go through after three business days even if a background check has not yet been completed. This dangerous loophole allows people who are legally prohibited from having firearms to still get their hands on them, posing a dangerous risk to our community, and in particular victims of domestic abuse. It's estimated that in 2020, almost 600,000 checks took longer than three business days, and nearly 6,000 illegal purchasers obtained guns through this loophole – more than any other year on record. Background checks are a well-established, widely supported policy, and you all demonstrated your commitment to requiring them back in 2018 when you expanded our laws to require background checks for private sales. It's time that Vermont closes this loophole and ensures that all firearm sales have a completed background check.

I urge you to support S. 30, as well as Representative Nottle's proposed amendments.

Thank you.

Seton Mcilroy
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