



**Testimony in Support of Jaelynn's Law - Public Safety -
Access to Firearms - Storage Requirements
SB 479/HB 200
Rev. Dr. Greta Willis, Director of Community
Engagement
Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence**

Dear Chairman Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Committee,

Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence (MPGV) aims to reduce gun violence in Maryland through evidence-based solutions. The Kevin L. Cooper Foundation aims to mobilize Baltimore City residents to make an impact in the reduction of inner city youth deaths due to violence. I currently serve as the Director of Community Engagement for MPGV and I am the founder of the Kevin L. Cooper Foundation, named in honor of my son Kevin who was shot and killed at the age of 14. MPGV, the Kevin L. Cooper Foundation, and I support SB 479 which aims to reduce child access to guns to prevent the death and injuries of children.

Each week, in my role as the Director of Community Engagement for MPGV, I work with young children at Liberty Elementary School. These children are in grief support programs that I run because they have been identified by their educators as being at risk because they have experienced a loss, be it in the form of death by gun violence, abandonment or a caregiver's incarceration. While the needs of these children differ from one another, one issue remains the same: access to deadly weapons is a threat to all children regardless of their race, socio economic status or family composition.

Often a discussion on gun reform can be controversial, but preventing young people from gaining access to firearms has been one of the areas I have seen common ground from all sides of the debate. The right to own a gun is a big responsibility, and protecting children from the dangers of a gun is the biggest of those responsibilities.

Families often feel the need to own a firearm for self-defense, but the inherent dangers that guns can pose to children must be addressed. Maryland current firearm access statute defines a minor as someone under the age of 16, but dangers still apply to those under the age of 18. It is essential that we close this dangerous loophole. We saw the dangers of this oversight with the murder of Jaelynn Willey in 2018 while within the walls of Great Mills

High School, but we also see it in the instances where teenagers take their own lives with a gun in the home. According to the Harvard Injury control Research Center, in 82% of youth suicides, the victim gained access to the firearm from a family member. Adolescence is a critical time for suicide prevention and this is particularly important for the young people with whom I work. Suicide rates among children of color are skyrocketing. Research shows that the suicide rate is two times higher for black elementary school aged children compared with white children of the same age group. (Bridge, J.A., Horowitz, L.M., Fontanella, C.A., Sheftall, A.H., Greenhouse, J.B., Kelleher, K.J., Campo, J.V. (2018). Age-related racial disparity in suicide rates among U.S. youths between 2001 and 2015. JAMA Pediatrics.). This is the age group of the children I work with every week.

Maryland leaders have understood the importance of preventing access to young people in the past when they passed the existing laws, but we must recognize and correct the inherent weaknesses within our current access prevention laws. SB 479 addresses this weakness by increasing the age of a minor, clarifying storage requirements, and creating a meaningful penalty to enhance compliance. Currently, if a youth gains access to a firearm, regardless of death or injury, there is only a fine. Allowing a child to get access to a gun is a serious negligent offense, and the penalty should reflect that.

Passing this law will help prevent young people while still allowing legal and responsible ownership of guns. **MPGV urges all the members of the committee to support Senate Bill 479.**

We urge the committee to support Senate Bill 479 to strengthen existing child access prevention provisions