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**ORAL TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 659:
Firearm Safety- Storage Requirements and Youth Suicide Prevention
Judiciary Committee - House of Delegates - February 23, 2022**

Thank you Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon, and committee members for all your hard work to improve the availability of healthcare services for Marylanders of all ages. My name is Rowan Willis-Powell, and I am here today representing On Our Own of Maryland. We are a statewide behavioral health (BH) peer education and advocacy organization, and our network of 20+ affiliated peer-run Wellness & Recovery Centers located throughout the state offer comprehensive, voluntary recovery support services, free of charge, to community members with mental health and substance use disorders. We also run a statewide Transitional Age Youth (TAY) Outreach Project, which empowers young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 who have experience with the behavioral health system. We advocate for young adults to be equal partners in the process of systems change on local, state, and national levels.

On Our Own of Maryland is in strong support of House Bill 659. By changing the law to require safe storage of firearms and ammunition when a minor has access to them, and creating a firearm safe storage guide, we are actively engaging in suicide prevention.

I have worked with young adults for the past 9 years, and many of them have struggled with thoughts of suicide. I experienced these feelings myself very intensely as a child. I constantly thought about all of the available options of means that existed in my world, including the guns owned by my father, a police officer. Before I had even disclosed my struggles to my parents, they had already taken the steps to make sure that I would never have access to those weapons by using trigger locks, keeping guns unloaded, storing ammo in a separate location, and using locked, out-of-sight storage with keys in a different secure location. These layers of security ensured that I was never able to attempt suicide with a gun, and I attribute these preventative measures to being a large reason that I'm still here today.

I've dedicated my career to supporting youth who struggle with suicidal ideation, and I want to highlight how access to means can dramatically increase the risk of completing suicide, especially for adolescents. About 5.4 million American children live in a household where there is at least one unlocked and loaded firearm present, and this is especially concerning because 80% of firearm suicide attempts by children involve a gun that belongs to a family member. A 2018 Maryland survey identified that 18% of high schoolers and 22% of middle school students were at high risk for suicide, and the suicide rate has been steadily increasing in our state since 2007. The stress and trauma of COVID has forced children into isolation, increased anxiety and distress, and removed so many wellness and support tools. By reducing the number of unlocked and loaded guns in their homes through this legislation, we are removing a means for harm, and creating more opportunities for youth to reach out for support and help.

It is vital that we take steps as a state to reduce the risk that firearms play for youth who are dealing with suicidal ideation, especially as the trauma and disruption caused by the COVID pandemic continues to impact young people's mental health. Limiting access to means is one of the most effective ways to suicide prevention. **On Our Own of Maryland strongly urges you to support House Bill 659.**