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The Maryland House of Delegates
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The Maryland House of Delegates
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony of Delegate Dana Stein in Support of House Bill 659

Firearm Safety - Storage Requirements and Youth Suicide Prevention (Jaelynn's Law)

Chairman Clippinger, Vice Chair Moon, and members of the House Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for your continued work to protect our communities, particularly our youth, from the impact of gun violence. HB 659 is named “Jaelynn’s Law” in honor of Jaelynn Willey who was killed by a fellow 17-year-old student at Great Mills High School in 2018. The weapon belonged to the 17-year-old’s father. Unfortunately, this type of situation has repeated itself many times since then. This past fall, a student in Michigan easily accessed a gun from his parents and used it to kill four students and injure six others. And, close to home for me, a 16-year-old was accidentally shot and killed in Baltimore by another 16-year-old who was using his parent’s gun just last month.

The bill before you this year has evolved since last year. My co-sponsors, Delegates Bartlett and Pena-Melnyk, and I added a public health education component. We want to support families with educational materials that help them understand that safe firearm storage reduces the risk of suicide and saves lives.

I have been alarmed by the rising rates of youth suicide as we finish the second year of this pandemic. One of every 15 high school students reports attempting suicide each year. At particular risk are students who are involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, have military families, or in the LGBTQ community.¹

The peer-review research establishes a strong link between youth suicide risk and access to firearms:

- 82% of youth under the age of 18 who attempted suicide by gun used a firearm belonging to a family member, usually a parent.²
- 85% of suicide attempts with a gun are fatal, compared to every other method which have a 5% fatality rate;³ and
- 75% of children report knowing exactly where firearms are stored in their homes – ultimately risking tragic outcomes.⁴

Safe storage of guns is a public health issue. We can see the evidence in the testimony before the committee today. The health care community – behavioral health providers, pediatricians, nurses, and hospital systems – are overwhelmingly in support of this bill.

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They are here today and united in their purpose to address the youth suicide epidemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there was a significant increase of emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts by adolescents, particularly for girls for whom the number of visits increased by 51% in 2020 compared to the prior year.⁵

We also know that many school shootings involve individuals with underlying mental health conditions. Safe storage of firearms protects our student community. From a *Washington Post* review of the data between 1999 and 2018, of the 105 school shootings by juveniles in which the source of the weapon could be determined, 84 of the firearms used were taken from the child's home or from those of relatives or friends.⁶¹

This bill, HB 659, updates Maryland's current law on firearm storage so as to better protect children. This bill requires all firearms, loaded or unloaded, to be stored in a location where an unsupervised minor under the age of 18 could not get access. The penalties are differentiated based on the impact of the violation, so that if a minor gets access and causes harm to themselves or another person, the penalty is higher than if no one is injured. In a new provision added since last year, the Department of Health will be required to collaborate with behavioral health providers, experts in safe firearm storage methods, and families to develop educational materials to support parents.

By requiring that firearms, loaded or unloaded, not be stored or left in a location where a minor could gain access, it is likely that we will reduce suicides, school shootings, and accidental shootings by and of our youth.

I encourage this committee to vote favorably for this legislation.

¹ <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-suicide-prevention>

² <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/youth-access/#:~:text=Source%20of%20Firearms%20in%20Youth%20Suicides&text=An%20NVISS%20study%20of%20firearm,family%20member%2C%20usually%20a%20parent.>

³ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/risk/>

⁴ <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/research/areas-of-research/center-for-injury-research-and-policy/injury-topics/general/gun-safety>

⁵ Yard E, Radhakrishnan L, Ballesteros MF, et al. Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12–25 Years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 2019–May 2021. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2021;70:888–894. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7024e1>

⁶ Cox and Rich, 2018.