

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0659:

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

****SUPPORT****

TO: Chair of the Judiciary Committee

FROM: Kay Connors, LCSW-C, Instructor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Maryland School of Medicine

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As a clinical social worker and trauma therapist for over 38 years and a faculty member at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in the Department of Psychiatry, I am submitting this testimony in support of HB0659's provisions to safely store guns and ammunition in a location that cannot be accessed by youth as a form of "means restriction" to prevent suicide.

Limiting access to lethal methods that could be used for suicide (e.g., guns, knives, belts, ropes, medication, etc.) is an important part of the safety plan mental health providers create with families when their children are experiencing a mental health crisis. Studies show that such means restriction is very effective.

There are many reasons that children, as young as 9 and 10 years old, think about wanting to die and many methods they might consider if they are very distressed. Children thinking about suicide might have ongoing depression or traumatic stress diagnoses or might be experiencing an acute crisis like being bullied. Children and teens experiencing suicidal crises often feel very ambivalent and have competing wishes to live and to die. Since gunshots can be very lethal, limiting their access can help to save children's lives during this period of crisis.

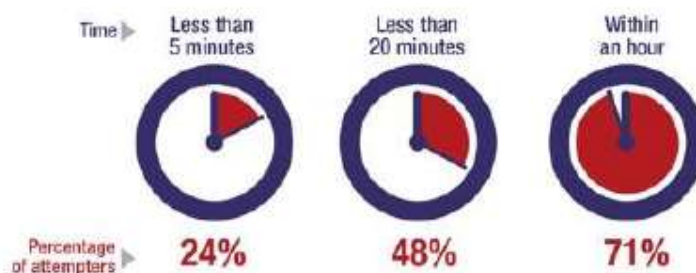
On a personal note, my family member died by suicide using a firearm. The pain, guilt and intense feelings of responsibility lives on in all of us. Even as a professional who works with people who have attempted or are thinking about suicidal, the intense suffering people who are thinking about suicide is sometimes hard to grasp. Safe gun and ammunition storage could mean the difference between life and death in crisis.

MEANS SAFETY AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

What is means safety? Means safety is limiting the access of lethal methods of suicide, such as reducing access to firearms and toxic substances.

Why is means safety important? Access to lethal means is a risk factor for suicide. Many suicide attempts take place during a short-term crisis; therefore, means restriction is an effective way to reduce the risk of suicide.¹

Time Elapsed between Decision and Suicide Attempt²



The decision to attempt suicide is a powerful, but brief impulse.

For Families, Peers, and Friends^{3,4}:

Families can restrict access to means by:

- Removing lethal means from households entirely.
- Store firearms with law enforcement (if allowed). Store guns in gun lockboxes and gun safes. Store ammunition in a separate location.
- Store medications safely and dispense safe quantities as necessary.

Peers or friends can:

- Ask direct questions about risk of suicide. Asking about suicide **does not** increase the risk of suicide.
- Ask for your friend's permission to store their means.
- Refer friends to mental health professionals.
- Encourage your friend to call crisis hotlines if they are in a crisis. Practice calling the crisis hotline with your friend.

For Law Enforcement:

- Train law enforcement officers about means restriction and suicide prevention.
- Increase the number of crisis intervention teams, and furthermore, increase collaboration between police officers and mental health professionals.
- Provide free gun locks and follow-up to see if people are using gun locks.
- Police officers can establish 1-on-1 turn in programs. When police officers are talking to individuals or families, at the end of the call police officers should ask: "Do you have any guns or drugs you want to turn in?"
- Collaborate with emergency department staff.
- Collaborate with gun dealerships.

For Colleges and Universities^{3,4}:

- Encourage joint training for counselors, faculty, campus security, and police.
- Ensure confidentiality of students involved in a crisis.
- Ensure access to high quality mental health care, with prompt and nonjudgmental avenues for treatment.
- Gather information about: suicide attempts and fatalities on own campus and campus policies about means (e.g. gun possession and access to toxic substances).
- Change policies and practices. Actions include: restrict access to high places, prohibit firearms on campus, offer lockers for gun owners to store firearms, and track and monitor toxic substances in laboratories.
- Minimize talk of "zero tolerance policies," given that students are less likely to come forward if they are concerned about the negative consequences for their peers.

How long should means safety last?

There is no universal answer – it depends on the person. Access to means should be restricted until the person is safe and no longer at risk. As a clinician, you should be actively and continuously assessing the risk for suicide.

With all the possibly dangerous items in a house (ie. cleaning products, laundry detergent, insecticides, medication, etc.) how far should means safety go to protect someone at risk?

Studies demonstrate that people typically have a preference for a specific means of suicide, and it is unlikely they will substitute the method if their preferred method is unavailable. Many people may think about suicide for a long period of time, but the actual decision to take their lives is often an impulsive one as the result of a short-lived crisis – restricting access to a specific method should not lead to an increase in the substitution of another means.

What recommendations do you have for means safety with veterans?

The military and veteran community is a unique population with high rates of firearm ownership, and also are more likely to die by suicide from a firearm. Encourage veterans to have a trusted friend store their firearms, store weapons unloaded, use gun locks, store firearms in a locked safe, and lock ammunition separately or not have ammunition. The VA provides free gun locks with the Veteran's Crisis Line on them. Cover Me Veterans creates custom gun skins for veterans. See this webpage: <http://covermeveterans.org/>

How can schools collaborate with parents/guardians in rural areas where many households possess firearms?

Schools can have conversations with families about the importance of means safety. If a school has identified a student at-risk for suicide, it is essential that schools communicate with families about means safety. Even if families do not have a child at-risk for suicide, if they have a child under 18 it is important to store firearms and all lethal means safely.

Is safety planning an effective way to reduce access to lethal means?

Counseling on and reducing access to lethal means is an important component of safety planning. Safety planning includes identifying an individual's triggers, warning signs, available supports to them, coping skills, and access to lethal means. It is always good practice to include a family member, friend, or significant other in the conversation about means safety. Additionally, counselors can encourage clients to use the My3 app.

Can a person at-risk for suicide be identified to their doctor or pharmacy to prevent access to large prescription refill amounts?

If you are concerned that a friend or family member may be depressed or at high risk for suicide, you can and should always tell their doctor. Due to privacy laws, doctors cannot provide you with information on the patient or even legally acknowledge that the patient is indeed their patient, without permission.

What advice do you have for families related to means restriction prior to their loved one leaving an inpatient hospitalization?

It is essential that families plan ahead for discharge. Planning efforts could include ensuring firearms are inaccessible, securing medication, creating safety plans, and creating a mental health advance directive.

What strategies would you give to a suicidal person to help them move beyond the crisis stage?

For most persons at risk, moving beyond the crisis stage involves reaching out to others that can help get past the most critical moments when those thoughts of suicide are all consuming. By spending time listening to the person at risk as they talk about what is going on, you can help them move towards safety.

References:
*WISQARS data (2015). Suicide: All Injury Deaths. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/wisqars/>
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*Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (n.d.). Suicide: Access to Means of Suicide. Retrieved from <https://www.sprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Access-to-Means-of-Suicide.pdf>
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Maryland Crisis Hotline

THERE IS HOPE
1-800-422-0009

