

SB0159:

Firearms - Maryland Voluntary Do Not Sell Firearm Registry - Establishment

FAVORABLE

I would like to thank the committee for considering this written testimony in support of SB0159, *Firearms - Maryland Voluntary Do Not Sell Firearm Registry - Establishment*.

I have written about and advocated for this policy in other states for six years and I researched this tool during my graduate studies. But most importantly, I am a Maryland resident who would use the voluntary do-not-sell firearm registry to protect myself from suicide.

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was 19 years old. During depressive and mixed episodes, I often experience suicidal thoughts and behaviors. In the 12 years since I was diagnosed, I have been hospitalized a number of times, often due to suicidality. When I am well – which is most of the time – I want nothing more than to protect my life. This is the nature of an episodic mood disorder.

Years ago, during an episode with mixed features, I researched where to buy a gun. Having worked in gun violence prevention for years, I knew every reason why someone who is suicidal should not have access to a gun. When I was well, I swore I would never own a gun and advocated for policies that could prevent firearm suicide. But when I was ill – suicidal, sleep-deprived, and agitated – that part of myself disappeared. I became someone who couldn't remember the things I cared about and all the wonderful things I had to live for.

Luckily, the help-seeking part of me prevailed. After consulting with my psychiatrist, I voluntarily admitted myself to the hospital. I survived my crisis. Too many others do not.

Access to firearms is a strong risk factor for suicide. Guns make suicide too quick, too easy, and there is rarely an opportunity for attempters to change their minds and/or seek medical attention. Once a person in suicidal crisis pulls the trigger, there is not a second chance, and the odds that the person will survive are low.¹

Temporarily reducing access to firearms during periods of high risk can save lives. People like me, who recognize that they are prone to suicidality, need this voluntary do-not-sell firearm registry. By allowing individuals who recognize their risk to preemptively put a barrier between themselves and the most lethal method of suicide, we can save lives.

Though the do-not-sell firearm registry would be a new tool in Maryland, self-regulation is not a novel concept. Maryland law allows those who struggle with problem gambling to voluntarily ban

¹ Anestis, M. D. (2018). *Guns and suicide: An American epidemic*. Oxford University Press.

themselves from casinos. In consultation with their doctors, individuals with alcohol use disorder sometimes choose to take medication that makes alcohol physically intolerable. A do-not-sell firearms registry allows individuals with insight into their risk for suicide to protect themselves *before* a crisis occurs; this tool should be offered to individuals with episodic illness/suicidality and high levels of insight who are not actively in crisis and do not already own guns.

A do-not-sell firearms registry would be a lifesaving tool for those who choose to use it, would not burden those who do not, and should be carefully implemented as a tool that is separate and distinct from other critically important, life-saving tools like Maryland's extreme risk protection order (ERPO). The do-not-sell firearms registry will not be an appropriate tool for everyone, but it has potential to protect a population that would otherwise remain vulnerable to firearm suicide.

Individuals who have not experienced the pain of mood episodes and/or recurring suicidal crises may be skeptical that anyone would use a voluntary do-not-sell firearms registry. But a 2017 study on this tool found that 46 percent of survey participants receiving inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care in Alabama would be willing to sign up for a do-not-sell firearms registry.² It is plausible that Marylanders might be even more willing to use this tool.

Given the lethality of firearms, the increased risk associated with access to firearms, the short-lived nature of many suicidal crises, and the nature of episodic illness, the do-not-sell firearms registry can be an important part of a larger strategy to prevent firearm suicide.

This bill would give those who recognize their risk – people like me – the agency to preempt crises and protect ourselves. For the reasons detailed above, I strongly support SB0159, *Firearms - Maryland Voluntary Do Not Sell Firearm Registry - Establishment*.

Respectfully,

Bryan Barks

² Vars, F. E., McCullumsmith, C. B., Shelton, R. C., & Cropsey, K. L. (2017). Willingness of Mentally Ill Individuals to Sign Up for a Novel Proposal to Prevent Firearm Suicide. *Suicide & life-threatening behavior*, 47(4), 483–492.
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