

February 6, 2023

My name is Fredrick Vars. I am a law professor at the University of Alabama, where I specialize in mental health and firearm law. On behalf of myself, I urge you to take action to combat the suicide epidemic by enacting the “Maryland Voluntary Do Not Sell Firearm Registry” (SB 159).

To call suicide an “epidemic” is not exaggeration: 24,292 people in the U.S. died by gun suicide in 2020. That’s 67 people each and every day. Many of those people used a recently purchased gun. SB 159 would allow individuals to temporarily suspend their OWN ability to purchase a firearm and thereby prevent impulsive suicides.

Some people think that if you limit access to guns, people will just choose another method, but that’s not true. People don’t switch methods, or they switch to much less lethal methods. Guns are 90% lethal, whereas all other methods combined are 4% lethal. Someone who uses a gun almost never gets a second chance. And data show that those who attempt suicide don’t just keep trying. Only 10% of suicide attempt survivors eventually die by suicide.

SB 159 will save lives without impacting gun owners in any way. Signing up is confidential and purely voluntary. No one is affected who doesn’t want to be. This is not gun control; it is self-control. Gun owners recognize this: in a national survey, a majority of gun owners supported the policy.

But a voluntary program is effective only if people volunteer. What if no one signs up? That’s not going to happen. Three states (WA, VA, & UT) have enacted similar laws that apply within their borders and dozens of people have already signed up. Several surveys confirm that many more people want this option.

I think I know why. I have bipolar disorder. I’ve been suicidal. I want to sign up. 15% of people with bipolar disorder die by suicide. If I had had easy access to a gun at certain points in my life, I might already be one of them. People who have never been severely depressed cannot understand what it’s like. You lose joy, you lose hope, and you lose the ability to make rational decisions. However, like almost all people with mental illness and others who consider suicide, I have periods of clarity. During these periods, I want to protect myself against future dark days.

Please support SB 159. Help us help ourselves.

Sincerely,

Fredrick E. Vars