
BILL NO:	Senate Bill 0943
TITLE:	Family and Law Enforcement Protection Act
COMMITTEE:	Judicial Proceedings
HEARING DATE:	February 19, 2025
POSITION:	SUPPORT

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is dedicated to ensuring the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women throughout the State. The clients that we represent have all experienced intimate partner violence, and the reality and danger of gun violence is something that the staff and clients of the Women's Law Center must grapple with every day. We are submitting this testimony in memory of the clients we have lost to violent partners and their guns.

We strongly support Senate Bill 0943 and the enhanced provisions it provides for the enforcement of the surrendering of firearms by a respondent in a domestic violence statute. Currently, respondent's surrendering of their guns is dependent upon an honor system, in which the courts are forced to trust that someone who has committed acts of violence and is deemed so dangerous as to merit a protective order will suddenly become adherent to the law. Our clients and staff are regularly threatened by violent abusers, and due to the prevailing honor system for firearm surrenders, often live in fear knowing the respondents' have untethered access to guns.

Our last client who lost her life to an unsurrendered firearm was Megan Saunders, who was shot and killed by Devon Elias, against whom she had a protective order on September 14, 2023. Megan called the Women's Law Center almost every day – we helped her obtain her protective order and were representing her in securing custody of the former couple's four-year-old daughter. Megan was a wonderful mother, but she called us over and over again, very apologetically, because she was terrified of Elias as he kept saying threatening things about her to their daughter. She even moved to Pennsylvania to get away from him, but in the end he murdered her in her mom's home with two handguns. Our staff attorney was waiting for her to appear in court that morning, and she never came.

Guns are almost always an issue in securing consent in a protective order, and the respondents who do consent regularly lie about their gun ownership. We strongly support SB 0943's provisions for petitioner reporting of the respondent's firearms as well as the enforcement mechanisms introduced for both search warrants and mandated law enforcement engagement in the reclamation process.

Intimate partner violence and gun violence are inextricably linked, impacting millions of women, families, and communities across the country. Nearly half of all women murdered in the United States are killed by a current or former intimate partner, and more than half of these intimate partner homicides are by firearms, according to Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Every month, an average of 76 U.S. women are shot and killed by their intimate partners and while the deadly intersection of guns and intimate partner violence affects all women, it has a disproportionate impact on Black and Indigenous women as well as pregnant and postpartum women (Everytown). We know the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities are also highly vulnerable to severe forms of relationship abuse, but there is alarmingly little data on the intersection of firearms and intimate partner violence among these populations because of underreporting of these incidents and failure to invest in research that disaggregates data to fully capture the extent of the problem.

While intimate partner violence involving guns is prevalent, research shows that federal and state policies that disrupt abusers' access to guns can save lives. For all these reasons we urge a favorable report on SB0943.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a non-profit legal services organization whose mission is to ensure the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women in Maryland. Our mission is advanced through direct legal services, information and referral hotlines, and statewide advocacy.