



**Testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee
February 8, 2012
Regarding Senate Bill 1550**

Chair Prozanski, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 1550. My name is David Reese, the General Counsel at Portland State University, and with me is Phil Zerzan, the Director of Campus Public Safety at PSU.

SB 1550 would prohibit the possession of firearms and other dangerous weapons on school grounds, which would include the grounds of a public university such as Portland State. Under the bill, the possession of a permit to carry a concealed weapon would not be an affirmative defense to a charge of violating the law. In that regard, the bill would treat school grounds in much the same way as the law currently treats court facilities.

Portland State supports this effort to keep guns off campus. We strongly believe that a proliferation of guns on campus would be detrimental to campus safety and contrary to the best interests of our students, faculty, staff and communities. This is a position that we share with the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA) and most other colleges and universities across the country. IACLEA is an international association of campus public safety directors that represents more than 1200 colleges and universities in 20 countries. In 2008, IACLEA took a strong law enforcement stand against permitting the application of "concealed carry" laws to campuses. IACLEA Position Statement, Concealed Carrying of Firearms Proposals on Campuses, Aug. 12, 2008, at http://www.iaclea.org/visitors/PDFs/ConcealedWeaponsStatement_Aug2008.pdf.

Our primary purpose today is to explain why our campuses are different from other locations. Those differences uniquely make university campuses places where firearms should not be permitted.

Portland State, like other university campuses, is a place where a large number of students live, study and play in a dense living environment. The challenges of college life, including drug and alcohol use and abuse, stress, social obstacles, and the heightened risks of mental health crises and suicide, when combined with readily available firearms, could have deadly consequence on our campus. Our students, like college students nationwide, engage in high risk behaviors such as binge drinking at a higher rate than the general population. In addition, it is well known that college students are at an elevated risk for suicide. These—and other—factors lead us to the conclusion that the presence of guns on campus is harmful to our students' wellbeing and to the maintenance of an appropriate learning environment.

To elaborate on those points, I'd like to introduce Phil Zerzan, our Director of Campus Public Safety. Phil is uniquely well qualified to talk about these issues. Not only is he the Director of Campus Public Safety at PSU, he is also a former Oregon State Police lieutenant and was the officer in charge of the Oregon State University OSP office for 8 years.

Good afternoon. During my career in law enforcement I have witnessed the finality that the presence of firearms brings to events and interactions. This finality is present in issues such as interpersonal violence, suicidal actions, and firearms accidents. This finality has untold costs both in terms of the loss of human life, human potential, and grief.

As an experienced campus law enforcement officer, I support legislation such as SB 1550 because of my deep concern that permitting the "concealed carry" of guns on campus has the potential to increase the occurrence and severity of violence on the campus that I am charged with protecting and contribute to the finality of what might otherwise be fleeting thoughts or brief interactions.

The addition of firearms often raises the stakes, and a shot fired in anger, desperation, or by mistake can create irreparable harm. There are no apologies, therapy or do-overs that can repair the damage caused by a gunshot wound.

Universities are by design places of learning and growing. The 18 year old child we send away to college develops and grows into the graduate ready to take their place in society and the workforce. This journey is not without challenges including alcohol, mental health issues, and relationship difficulties.

All of these challenges become particularly difficult with the addition of firearms.

I am concerned about the potential for the accidental discharge and misuse of firearms at on-campus or off-campus parties where large numbers of students are gathered or at student gatherings where alcohol or drugs are being consumed. I am also concerned about the potential for guns to be used as a means to settle disputes between or among students.

In addition, I am uncomfortable with the notion that responsible citizens carrying concealed firearms can contribute to the overall safety of the campus. I am familiar with the arguments, but as a former police officer, I am concerned that police officers responding to a situation involving an active shooter may not be able to distinguish between the shooter and others with firearms. Police are extensively trained to deal with active shooter situations, whereas students, faculty and staff members with concealed weapons permits are not trained or integrated into campus security plans. Armed students or employees have the potential to get in the way of trained professionals and to escalate explosive situations further.

The presence of weapons on campus also leads to concerns about gun theft and the potential misuse of those guns by persons other than their owners.

Academic studies suggest that the presence of firearms is specifically inappropriate to the uniqueness of the university environment and community.

- One study found that two-thirds of gun-owning college students engage in binge drinking. Gun-owning students are more likely than unarmed college students to drink “frequently and excessively” and then engage in risky activities, such as driving when under the influence of alcohol, vandalizing property, and getting into trouble with police. Matthew Miller, David Hemenway & Henry Wechsler, *Guns and Gun Threats at College*, 51 *J. Am. C. Health* 57, 63 (Sept. 2002).
- Another study similarly discovered that college student gun owners are more likely than those who do not own guns to engage in activities that put themselves and others at risk for severe or life-threatening injuries, including reckless behavior involving alcohol, driving while intoxicated, and suffering an alcohol-related injury. Matthew Miller, David Hemenway & Henry Wechsler, *Guns at College*, 48 *J. Am. C. Health* 7, 9 (1999).

Mental health issues among students experiencing life away from home and the challenges of the university environment is a frequent occurrence and has resulted in a collaborative response involving campus public safety, the dean of students, and medical providers to address this important concern. According to the Suicide Prevention Network, suicide is the second leading cause of death among American college students. Access to firearms on campus would likely exacerbate this problem. Suicide attempts with guns are fatal in more than 90% of cases, whereas suicide attempts by other methods are far less likely to succeed. It is an inescapable conclusion that easy access to firearms by students provides a highly efficient and convenient method for suicide during a momentary mental health crisis.

Campus safety is a significant concern at universities nationwide. This is particularly true on an urban campus such as ours. Nonetheless, statistics show that campuses are generally safe environments for students. A U.S. Department of Justice study comparing the violent victimization of college students versus non-students, aged 18 to 24, from the period 1995 – 2002 found that students experience less violence annually than non-students. That study also found approximately 9 out of 10 college students who were victims of violent crime were victimized off campus, rather than on campus and that firearms were used in only 9% of all violent crimes against college students over this period. Office of Justice Programs, U.S. DOJ, Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Rpt., *Nat’l Crime Victimization Survey, Violent Victimization of College Students, 1995-2002* (Jan. 2005), at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/vvcs02.pdf>.

Maintaining gun free university campuses in Oregon is an important component of maintaining safe campuses. Guns on campus have the very real possibility of deteriorating, rather than improving, the safety of our campuses.

For these reasons, Portland State support SB 1550. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. We would be happy to answer any questions.