

Date: April 2, 2019

TO: The Honorable Floyd Prozanski, Chair
Senate Committee on Judiciary

FROM: Katrina Hedberg, MD, MPH
Health Officer & State Epidemiologist
Public Health Division
Oregon Health Authority

SUBJECT: SB 978, relating to firearms

Chair Prozanski and members of the committee, I am Dr. Katrina Hedberg, Health Officer and State Epidemiologist in the Public Health Division of the Oregon Health Authority (OHA). I am here to testify on the impact of firearm injuries and deaths in Oregon, and the importance of having data from emergency departments to support firearm safety efforts in our state.

Over the past decade, the number of firearm deaths in Oregon has been steadily increasing. In 2017 alone, the year for which we have the most recent data, 529 Oregonians died from firearms, of which 439 (83%) were suicides. Oregon's rate of firearm deaths exceeds that of the US, and in Oregon men are 6 times more likely than women to die from a firearm injury. From Oregon's Violent Death Reporting System, we know some of the circumstances that surrounded these deaths, including: type of firearm used (77% of deaths involved a handgun), location of death, and the mental health status of the decedent.

Our understanding of the number and severity of firearm injuries is less complete. The current system for tracking firearm injuries comes from emergency departments via the Oregon Electronic Surveillance System for the Early Notification of Community-Based Epidemics (ESSENCE) system and hospital discharge records via the Oregon Association of Hospitals & Health Systems (OAHHS). Neither of these datasets include reporting "external cause codes" which would help us to distinguish which were unintentional (accidental), or intentional (i.e., suicide or

homicide). Including external cause codes in the data these systems collect would enable OHA to track the number of firearm injuries that occur, the type of firearm involved, and whether the injury was intentional or accidental. This information is critical to designing and implementing effective strategies to prevent such injuries.

OHA's mission is to improve the health of Oregonians, including preventing premature deaths from injuries, suicides or homicides. Having better data about firearm-related injury would inform efforts to improve firearm safety.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to provide further information to the committee.