

February 6, 2024

Chair Prozanski and Members of the Committee,

My name is Sarah Spafford, and I am a researcher at the University of Oregon in the Suicide Prevention Lab and a resident of Springfield, Oregon. My education and research work have been dedicated to the prevention of suicide and promotion of mental wellbeing across the lifespan for the past 13 years. I am writing to urge you to support Senate Bill 1503, which would establish a community safety and firearm suicide prevention task force.

Oregon's firearm ownership rate is higher than the national average (32%), with estimates indicating over 41% households in Oregon owned a firearm in 2016.^{1,2} Though there are many risk factors for suicide, there is substantive research which indicates that the presence of firearms in the home is a significant risk factor for suicide.³⁻⁵ Indeed, one meta-analytic review of individual-level studies revealed that access to a firearm in the home increased the risk of suicide more than three-fold.⁶

No community in Oregon is free from the impacts of gun violence and firearm suicide. Six out of ten Oregonians report that they or someone they know has been injured or killed by gun violence, including suicide, or been threatened by a gun. In Oregon, those in our rural areas suffer the most from the devastating loss of suicide. The firearm suicide rate in rural Oregon is 2.5 times higher than in urban areas and the state's veteran suicide rate is 37% higher than the national average. To address this issue, we must increase our efforts towards reducing access to lethal means (e.g., firearms) while individuals are experiencing suicidal thoughts. For example, lethal means safety counseling, the process of determining if a person at risk for suicide has access to lethal means and working with that person (and their friends and family) to reduce access to lethal means until the suicide risk subsides, is an evidence-based practice that keeps those at risk of suicide safe while they receive the support and care they need to withstand a suicidal crisis. Establishing this community safety and firearm suicide prevention task force is the first step towards integrating lethal means safety practices into additional communities and supporting those experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Oregon needs to get serious about addressing firearm suicide and gun violence. This bill will bring together experts, stakeholders and impacted communities from across political backgrounds and across the state, to study the issue and make recommendations for how to reduce firearm injuries and deaths. The Task Force will take a public health approach to studying best practices for reducing deaths from gun violence and firearm suicide, including suicide among youth and rural Oregonians, community violence in both rural and urban areas, gun violence prevention in health care settings, and firearm safety planning and holding policies. I strongly encourage you to support SB 1503 to bring communities together, hear the voices of those impacted most by firearm suicide and gun violence, and bring support to those experiencing suicidal crisis.

Sincerely,



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