



TO: Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety

FROM: Bertrand D. Berger, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Captain John D. Mason Veteran Peer Outreach Program, Director
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine

DATE: May 6, 2021

RE: Support for Senate Bill 200, Relating to Grants to Prevent Suicide by Firearm

The Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) strongly supports Senate Bill 200 (SB 200), and applauds the work of Senator Kathleen Bernier and Representative Jesse James for their authorship and advocacy of this legislation, as well as the leadership of Chairperson Van Wanggaard and the members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety for holding a public hearing on this important legislation.

I am a licensed clinical psychologist in the state of Wisconsin and an Assistant Professor at MCW. I am the chairperson for the Southeastern Wisconsin Task Force on Veteran Suicide Prevention, and a member of the Governors Challenge to end Veteran Suicides. I am also the director of the Captain John D. Mason Veteran Outreach Program at MCW which is dedicated to help Veterans connect to the VA and other healthcare systems and not die by suicide, as did Captain Mason, who was a decorated combat Vietnam Veteran.

According to the CDC, suicide rates in the United States have increased by nearly one third over the past 20 years and suicide is the 10th leading cause of death. In 2017, the suicide rate for Veterans was 1.5 times the rate for non-Veteran adults. In the State of Wisconsin, suicide was ranked as the 10th leading cause of death in 2020, and similar to the rest of the country, the suicide rate in Wisconsin increased by 40% from 2000 to 2017. About 1 in 5 suicides between 2012 to 2017 in Wisconsin was a Veteran, at a rate of 33.8 per 100,000. Accounting for age differences, the Veteran suicide rate in Wisconsin was significantly higher than the national Veteran suicide rate, the national suicide rate, and the Wisconsin suicide rate.

In review of data on violent death, the use of firearms is the most frequent mechanism of injury in suicide, higher even than in homicide. About 90% of firearm-related suicide attempts are fatal, as compared to approximately 5% of suicide attempts by all other mechanisms combined. Several studies have shown that rates of suicide are higher in states with higher levels of firearm ownership and these heightened rates are driven by firearm suicides. The per capita registered guns in Wisconsin is 11.9 per 1000, ranked 40th in the country. In the Veteran population, firearms were the method of suicide in 70.7% of male Veteran and 43.2% of female Veteran suicide deaths. In contrast, approximately half of suicides among non-Veteran adults in Wisconsin involved firearms. Additionally, it was found that 33.3% of Veteran firearm owners store at least one firearm loaded and unlocked. Restricting access to lethal means (e.g., ligature points, bridge access, poisons, and firearms) has been shown to be effective in

preventing suicide; therefore, interventions to provide lethal means restriction among Veterans, especially regarding firearms, is of the utmost importance.

Lethal means counseling which addresses firearm safety strategies within the home has been shown to be effective. However, storage of firearms outside the home is another promising strategy to impact access to firearms for individuals who are at risk of suicide. There are at least 16 firearm storage projects throughout the United States which provide various levels of education materials and firearm storage availability to the public. The Colorado Firearms Safety Coalition's firearm storage program is one of the most comprehensive in the nation. This program provides an interactive map of various firearm storage facilities throughout the state and provides links to educational materials and other similar programs.

Even though there are no published outcomes on firearm storage projects, the Wisconsin public was informed about a Dane County firearm storage project, (i.e., the Gun Shop Project) through local television and newspaper media interest. I am the director of the Captain John D. Mason Veteran Outreach program which has adopted and is promoting this program by engaging gun shops and gun ranges throughout the state of Wisconsin on the SE Wisconsin Task Force on Veteran Suicide Prevention's website. The website has developed a map modeled after the Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition, which shows the location of gun shops that have voluntarily agreed to be part of a program which provides suicide prevention materials and gun storage to customers. We have, to date, signed up five gun shops in the state of Wisconsin. The Task Force's website is a free service and is updated as we have new gun shops sign up. We will be promoting the program through press releases, our website and social media outlets as the program expands, since we want people to use the service once we have the gun shops participating. However, we are struggling to get gun shop and ranges to participate.

According to the federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearm (ATF) department, there are 1800 Federal Firearms License (FFL) throughout the state of Wisconsin. Therefore, our program and any other programs like ours, which could be supported by this bill, have many opportunities to engage these Federally Licensed firearm gun shops and ranges. This bill will help facilitate this program to be expanded throughout the state of Wisconsin in every county. However, in our conversations with gun shops, they bring up the following barriers and concerns to participating:

1. We don't have storage space for this project in our store
2. We would like a separate safe or area in our store and don't have the funding to do this.
3. We don't have the time to do the background checks
4. We don't have the time to explain or work with people on this without financial help as we have regular customers to attend to

The appropriation of funds, as written in this bill to support agencies, which support these gun shops and gun ranges will significantly impact the ability of gun shops and ranges to participate in this program.

My personal goal, Captain Mason program, the Task Force's goal and the Governor's challenge goals all align, to provide this voluntary option to Veterans and non-Veterans as is noted in this bill; that anyone can learn about suicide prevention in multiple venues like gun shops, to learn about safe firearm behaviors, to know that suicide is preventable if people are willing to get the help; as well as having the option to store their firearm outside of their home.

This issue for safe gun storage at gun shops and ranges is not about taking guns away from people but by providing another option for people and their friends and family, who are in a crisis to have a way to make their home a safer environment during the crisis. After the crisis, they can still retrieve their firearm. There is research that shows that most suicides are impulsive and happen within minutes to an hour.

Take a moment to imagine someone that uses a gun to attempt to kill themselves in a fit of frustration, anger or sadness. Most people do not usually survive from a bullet to the heart or head. I have spoken to some of those rare survivors that want to continue to live after their attempt. It is a devastating life for them due to the ongoing medical fallout they must live with. So, this program could save the life of someone who is in a crisis and now does not have easy access to their gun. These people are more likely to stop, altogether, from attempting suicide. This is how this program can save a life. Even one gun stored outside of the home may save a life and it is difficult to place a cost on that life. I encourage you to approve this bill for the good of the state of Wisconsin.

Thank you for your consideration of this legislation, and please support Senate Bill 200. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Nathan Berken, Director of Government Relations at 414.955.8217, or nberken@mcw.edu.