

Public Testimony for hearing - SP 953, LD 2224

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Thank you, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and members of the committee for holding these hearings today.

My name is James LaPlante I am a citizen of South Portland.

In September of 2020 my brother Stephen took his own life by shooting himself in the head with a handgun. As terrible as that was, it could have turned out much worse.

My brother had been struggling with bipolar schizophrenia for more than a decade. He was hospitalized many times – each hospitalization voluntary and each one too short and ineffective at really helping him.

When my brother was hospitalized in 2018 he had a collection of replica pellet guns in the basement apartment under my mother's house. I was terrified that he would end up using these guns in ways that would put himself and my mother in a dangerous situation. I asked him if I could remove the guns and he agreed. I spent 2 days finding several pellet guns hidden throughout his apartment and in his car. I thought to myself that he only had these pellet guns because he would never be allowed to purchase real firearms with his mental diagnosis. One that qualified him for disability programs.

In 2019 my brother started talking about his fears that society was going to break down. He was prepping and planning and he started to tell me about his new collection of guns. This time they were real guns. In shock, I asked him how he bought the guns. He bought them at the local gun dealer, the Walmart and the pawn shop. He passed every background check.

When the pandemic hit my brother's paranoia grew more intense. My brother was convinced that people were spreading rumors about him in town. The customers at the convenient store down the road, the checkout clerk at the grocery store and the waitress at the pizza place. The same kind of rumors that Robert Card thought people were spreading about him before his mass shooting in Lewiston – the one that brings us all to this hearing today.

My brother could have become a mass shooter. He had several weapons, thousands of rounds of ammunition, and several high-capacity magazines. I was terrified for my mother's safety, for my family's safety. But there was little I felt could do.

When I consulted with the police, I was told there is not much they can do until he commits a crime. The police had been to the property before in response to complaints about gunfire on the property. All they could do was talk to him about safety and being mindful of the noise. My brother could be a charming person and knew how to talk to police to keep them off his case.

I looked into Maine's Yellow flag law and what it would take to use it. I read other's accounts of the law failing them and how hard it was to find a psychiatrist willing to make a diagnosis. I thought about the risks I would take if my brother was released and had his guns returned. Would we end up part of the conspiracy against him. Would we end up targets of his arsenal.

I was placed in an untenable situation

If Maine had a true red flag law or a comprehensive extreme risk law, I may have felt safer in being more proactive in getting the police to intervene. If I knew that my brothers' weapons were going to be removed and held by the police and not me. If I knew that my brother would no longer be legally allowed to purchase or possess firearms. And if my brother was not able to avoid background checks in private sales to get a gun. I may have felt safer taking action.

But I do not feel safe.

What happened with my brother was tragic but could have been so much worse.

I implore you to take your service to the state seriously and to pass meaningful and effective gun regulations to keep us all safe.

Thank you.