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Testimony for LD 2224: An Act to Strengthen Public Safety by Improving Maine's Firearm Laws and Mental Health System

Good morning Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary. My name is Dr. Julia Oppenheimer, and I live in Portland, Maine. I am a resident physician in pediatrics. I represent the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and thus, a large network of pediatricians across the state. We stand in support of LD 2224, because stronger firearm safety laws will undoubtedly protect the lives of children and people of all ages in Maine.

In 2019, firearm injuries became the leading cause of death for children in the United States.¹ It is our prerogative as pediatricians to protect children from harm, and as such, we advocate for safe storage of firearms in the home. For adolescents struggling with mental health or substance use disorders, we take action to provide wraparound behavioral health services and firearm protections to reduce their risk of suicide and violence. But we have also seen an epidemic of mass shootings in recent years, including horrific acts of violence in schools and public spaces. Over the past five years, school shootings have become more frequent, and more deadly.² Outside of the medical office, we feel powerless to protect children and families from senseless firearm violence. That is why we are here today to advocate for stronger firearm laws to promote the public safety of our communities.

We support stronger extreme risk protection orders that allow timely suspension of an individual's access to firearms if they show clear warning signs of violence or suicide. A recent review of extreme risk laws in 6 states showed that over 650 petitions were filed for mass shooting threats, 20% of which were directed toward schools.³ Connecticut has also seen a 14% decrease in gun suicide rates associated with their extreme risk law.⁴

We also support expanding background check requirements to unlicensed firearm sellers, including online sales and gun shows. In the US, 80% of firearms acquired for criminal purposes are purchased from unlicensed sellers.⁵ More than 1 out of 5 gun owners purchased a recent firearm without a background check⁶. There is robust evidence that universal background checks reduce gun deaths in children and people of all ages.^{7,8}

We are all still reeling from the tragic losses of life from firearm violence in Lewiston this past fall. The shooter showed clear warning signs that his family and peers in the Army Reserve not only noticed but took measures to notify the authorities.⁹ The firearms he used were purchased legally.¹⁰ We need stronger protections that would allow law enforcement to intervene and prohibit those at risk of violence from possessing or purchasing firearms. We need stronger behavioral health crisis networks. The lives of our children and families depend on it.

We urge you to stand with us to better protect Maine's children and vote for LD 2224. I appreciate your consideration and work on this topic, and I am happy to answer questions. Thank you.

Julia Oppenheimer MD

Portland

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