



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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March 4, 2024

*Testimony of Rep. Amy D. Kuhn in support of*  
**LD 2237, An Act to Strengthen Public Safety, Health, and Well-being by  
Expanding Services and Coordinating Violence Prevention Resources**  
*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Amy Kuhn and I proudly represent the residents of House District 111 in the Town of Falmouth.

I am grateful to be with you today to speak in support of LD 2237. In particular, I will be describing Part E of the bill relating to the Gun Shop Project, which is a firearm suicide prevention program that has been adopted in a dozen other states.

As this committee is aware, the vast majority of gun related deaths in Maine are by suicide. According to the most recent report<sup>1</sup> from the Maine CDC, suicide accounted for 158 out of the 178 firearm related deaths in 2021 – that is 88.7%. I would also note that in 2021, the rate of gun deaths by suicide rose by 29.7% over the previous year.

This is a public health crisis. It is incumbent on us as lawmakers to seek out and support evidence based suicide prevention methods. The Gun Shop Project is one such method that seeks to bring prevention awareness to the point of sale, when the person in crisis goes to a gun shop to secure the means to harm themselves.

The bill would direct DPS in consultation with DHHS to develop a free, voluntary training program for gun shop owners and their employees to recognize the clinical signs and symptoms of someone in a suicidal crisis. As in other states, the training would consist of written materials, posters, pamphlets, and video for gun shop owners to distribute within their stores.<sup>2</sup> These evidence-based practices can help alert staff to someone in crisis and empower staff to decline a

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<sup>1</sup> Report to the Legislature from Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Maine DHHS (February 2023): <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/9742>

<sup>2</sup> NH's Gun Shop Project materials can be found here: <https://theconnectprogram.org/resources/nh-firearm-safety-coalition/>

sale if they are concerned about a customer's wellbeing. Gun shops may also offer information about supportive resources for any customer who is turned away and appears in need of help.

The Gun Shop Project was developed out of a partnership between the New Hampshire Firearms Safety Coalition, which is a multi-stakeholder group, and the Means Matter program at Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health. In researching this program, I was heartened to learn that gun shop owners in New Hampshire welcomed this training when it became available. I have included a link to an article about Ralph Demicco, a former gun shop owner and the founder of this Project.<sup>3</sup> Ralph recalls learning in 2009, that over the course of six days, three separate people (with no connection to each other) bought firearms from his store and killed themselves within hours of purchase. He was heartbroken. In response, he went around to local shops and asked if they would be willing to hang posters and give out suicide awareness cards. The gun shops were responsive, and Ralph has gone on to bring this important support to gun shop owners and their employees across New Hampshire and beyond.

Finally, I would like to offer one suggestion on the bill language for the committee's consideration. Part E, section 3 delegates the creation of the gun shop curriculum primarily to the Department of Public Safety. After speaking with folks at NAMI last week, I would like to suggest switching that to the Department of Health and Human Services. My understanding is that DHHS is the agency more commonly tasked with creating this type of public health campaign and might be the more appropriate body.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation. I urge the committee to vote *Ought to Pass* on LD 2237.

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<sup>3</sup> CNN, The Gun Shop Owner: <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2014/12/us/cnn-guns-project/gun-shop-owner.html>

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## REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

**TO:** Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services  
**FROM:** Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Maine DHHS  
**DATE:** February 2023  
**RE:** Report pursuant to 22 MRS, Ch. 256-A §1425

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Pursuant to 22 MRS §1425, the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) at the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) submits this second annual report representing the available data for firearm-related deaths and hospitalizations occurring in Maine from January 2021 through December 2021 as provided to Maine CDC by its partners, including Maine Health Data Organization (MHDO), the Office of the Medical Examiner and the Maine Department of Public Safety (DPS). Additional sources of data specific to incidents involving the use of a firearm and information beyond the scope of this legislative report mandate have been identified and these include, but are not limited to: Maine's Violent Death Reporting System, Maine's Domestic Violence and Homicide Review Panel and National Electronic Injury Surveillance System-All Injury Program (NEISS-AIP).

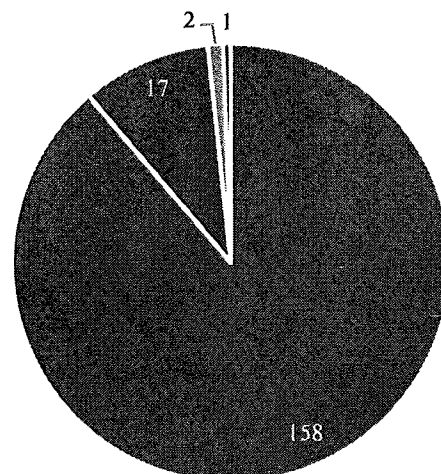
### FIREARM FATALITIES: OVERALL

In Maine in 2021, there were 178 deaths by firearms. Of these deaths, 2 were unintentional, 17 were homicides, 158 were suicides. There was one death where the manner could not be determined.

Firearm Fatalities by Category				
	2020		2021	
Suicide	132	85.7%	158	88.7%
Homicide	19	12.3%	17	9.6%
Unintentional	3	1.9%	2	1.1%
Undetermined	0	0%	1	.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>154</b>		<b>178</b>	

*Categories are determined by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.*

Firearm Fatalities 2021



■ Suicide      ■ Homicide  
■ Unintentional   ■ Undetermined

## UNINTENTIONAL FIREARM FATALITIES

Unintentional firearm fatality is a case of a person's death caused by a firearm discharging unintentionally.

Unintentional Deaths by Firearm by Age Group		
Age Group	2020	2021
<15	0	2
15-24	1	0
25-34	1	0
35-44	0	0
45-54	0	0
55-64	1	0
65+	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>

Source: Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention,  
Maine Office of Data, Research and Vital Statistics, Death certificate data

## HOMICIDE

In 2021, there were 17 firearm-related homicides in Maine. Of these deaths, more than 1 in 3 were domestic violence (DV) homicides. According to Maine's Domestic Violence Homicide Review Panel, about 40% of domestic violence homicide perpetrators use a firearm to kill their victim.

Homicides by Firearm by Age Group				
	2020		2021	
Age Group	Total	DV (subset)	Total	DV (subset)
<15	0	0	0	2
15-24	4	1	1	0
25-34	5	1	7	0
35-44	3	1	2	0
45-54	1	0	6	0
55-64	5	3	1	0
65+	1	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>

Notes: Firearm homicide data were run from the death records filed and registered with Data, Research, and Vital Statistics, and compared with the Maine State Police Report on homicides, found on their website [2021 Annual Homicides | Maine State Police](#)). The Office of Chief Medical Examiner provided input on records not found on the State Police website.

The following ICD 10 codes were used to identify firearm deaths: W32, W33, W34, X72, X73, X74, X94, X95, Y22, Y23, Y24, Y35, and U014

Source: Maine Vital Records, Maine CDC, Department of Health and Human Services, Maine State Police, Department of Public Safety, and the Office of Chief Medical Examiner, Maine Attorney General's Office.

Beginning January 2022, DPS will implement a revised data collection form to require law enforcement agencies to submit additional data elements for firearm-related incidents occurring January 1, 2022 and after.

## SUICIDE

Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among those ages 15-54 years old in Maine<sup>1</sup>. In 2021, 277 Mainers died by suicide. Of these deaths, 56% (n=158) used a firearm. Men are more likely to die by suicide using a firearm than women. Most suicide deaths that involved a firearm occurred among individuals older than 25 years of age.

Number of Suicides by Firearm		
Age Group	2020	2021
<25	13	14
25-44	33	56
45-64	44	52
65+	42	36
<b>2021 Total</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>158</b>

Notes: Suicide related deaths are defined as deaths of Maine residents for which the underlying cause of death was coded as ICD-10 U03 X60-X84 or Y87.0.

Data Source: Maine death certificates, Maine CDC Data, Research and Vital Statistics

## FIREARM-RELATED HOSPITALIZATIONS

In 2021, there were 54 firearm-related injuries that resulted in hospitalization in Maine, an increase from 39 in 2020. Of these, 48 (89%) were among men; 17 (31%) were among those aged 25-34 years. Most firearm-related injury hospitalizations were due to accidental discharge of a firearm, followed by assault by firearm.

Non-fatal Firearm-related Hospital Discharges by Firearm-related Cause		
Cause of Injury	2020	2021
Accidental discharge or malfunction of firearm	15	24
Intentional self-harm by firearm	8	10
Assault by firearm	14	17
Terrorism involving firearms	0	0
Firearm discharge of undetermined intent	1	0
Legal intervention involving firearm discharge	1	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>54</b>

Notes: Data include Maine Non-Federal/Non Psychiatric Acute Care Hospital Discharges with Principal Diagnosis of injury and firearm-related secondary diagnosis or injury cause code

Data Source: Maine Health Data Organization Hospital Inpatient Database 2021

## RELATED RESOURCES

The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention publishes data on causes of nonfatal injury via Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) Nonfatal, providing data from the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System-All Injury Program (NEISS-AIP)<sup>2</sup>. The NEISS-AIP data provides information about types of nonfatal injuries in U.S. hospital emergency departments, how common they are, who they affect, and what causes them.

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Centers for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) (2021). Available at: [www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars](http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars)

<sup>2</sup> <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/data/non-fatal/home>



## *New Hampshire Firearm Retailers:*

### **Your vigilance could save a life!**

Close to one in ten firearm suicides in New Hampshire occur with guns purchased within that same week, usually within *hours*. While not all suicides are preventable, you could reduce the odds that a gun bought at your store today is used in a suicide tomorrow.

### **Signs that a potential buyer could be suicidal**

*Note: None of these signs clearly indicate someone is suicidal, but if any are present (especially if more than one is present), use extra caution in deciding whether to proceed with the sale.*

- No knowledge about guns AND no interest in learning; asks no questions
- Doesn't care which gun s/he purchases or seem responsive to your questions about the purchase
- Gives unconvincing response when asked what s/he intends to use the gun for
- No interest in firearm maintenance or safety
- Mentions recent crisis, such as a divorce, job loss, or other setback
- Makes comments that could suggest suicidality (e.g. "I don't need a lot of ammunition, I won't have the gun for long.")
- Looks anxious, avoids eye contact
- Appears distraught (shaking, fighting back tears)

### **Options for responding to a potentially suicidal buyer**

- Notify store owner or manager (if applicable) if at all uncomfortable with a prospective sale
- Urge customer with little firearm experience to seek training before buying
- Ask the customer why s/he wants a firearm and how and where s/he plans to use it
- Suggest the customer take some more time to think it over before buying
- If s/he claims to be buying for self-defense, offer to sell pepper spray instead
- Ask person directly if s/he is suicidal; if yes, offer National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number (1-800-273-TALK [8255])
- Notify nearby dealers that someone you denied a sale to may go to their store; notify police
- Trust your instincts; you are under no obligation to sell a gun to anyone

### **"What else can I do?"**

- Display a suicide prevention hotline poster in your store
- Distribute firearm safety brochures to buyers that include information about recognizing suicide warning signs and keeping firearms away from suicidal or depressed family members
- For more information on suicide prevention in NH visit [www.theconnectproject.org](http://www.theconnectproject.org)
- Spread the word! Ask other dealers you know to visit our website to request our materials



## *New Hampshire Range Owners:*

### **Your vigilance could save a life!**

Over 1-in-20 firearm suicides in New Hampshire occur with guns purchased or rented within that same week, usually within hours. While not all suicides are preventable, you could reduce the odds that a gun rented or sold at your range is used in a suicide moments later. Many gun ranges have adopted policies that require proof of training for people seeking to rent a gun who are both at the range alone and unknown to the staff.

#### **Signs that a customer could be suicidal**

*Note: None of these signs clearly indicate someone is suicidal, but if any are present (especially if more than one is present), use extra caution in deciding whether to proceed.*

- No knowledge about guns AND no interest in learning; asks no questions
- Doesn't care which gun s/he rents; is unresponsive to your questions about the rental
- Gives unconvincing response when asked about prior shooting experience/training
- No interest in firearm instruction or safety
- Mentions recent crisis, such as a divorce, job loss, or other setback
- Makes comments that could suggest suicidality (e.g. "I don't need a lot of ammunition, I won't have the gun for long.")
- Looks anxious, avoids eye contact
- Appears distraught (shaking, fighting back tears)

#### **Options for responding to a customer you suspect may be suicidal**

- Notify range owner or manager (if applicable) if at all uncomfortable with a prospective rental
- Urge customer with little firearm experience to seek training before renting
- Ask person directly if s/he is suicidal; if yes, offer the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline number 988 (Dial 988 and then 1 for veterans).
- Notify nearby dealers/range owners that someone you denied a rental may go to their store/range; notify police
- Trust your instincts; you are under no obligation to rent a gun to anyone

#### **"What else can I do?"**

- Consider displaying a suicide prevention hotline poster in your range
- Give customers firearm safety brochures that include information about recognizing suicide warning signs and keeping firearms away from suicidal or depressed family members
- For more information on suicide prevention in NH visit:  
<https://theconnectprogram.org/articles/annual-reports/>
- Spread the word!
- Ask other dealers/range owners you know to visit our website to request our materials

If, in spite of your best efforts, a suicide does occur at your facility, anyone who witnessed the incident or its aftermath may be affected. The state's Disaster Behavioral Health Response Team is available to help people process the experience. There is no fee for this service. Contact them at:

**<https://www.dhhs.nh.gov/disaster-behavioral-health>**

- Resources for people affected by a suicide loss can be found at:  
<https://theconnectprogram.org/find-support/coping-with-suicide-loss/>



## Gun Shops and Suicide

Q & A with the NH Firearm Safety Coalition

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**1. If I deny a sale to a suicidal person, won't they just use another method?**

Some won't, others will. But almost every other method they would use is less likely to kill them. Also, other methods allow time for rescue or for the person to change their mind mid-attempt.

**2. Won't a person who attempts suicide and survives eventually figure out a way to kill themselves later?**

Suicidal feelings often pass over time. Studies that follow people over many years have found that over 90% of those who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to kill themselves later. This includes studies of people who made a very serious attempt, like jumping in front of a train.

**3. Suicide is a sensitive subject—I'm concerned about offending my customers or making them feel uncomfortable.**

It's true this is a difficult subject; but it's also true that thoughtful conversations about hard topics can produce good outcomes, in this case even save lives. A customer might see our poster or brochure in your store, for example, and talk his newly-divorced brother into putting his guns into storage until his depression lifts. Your store may have just helped save a life without your even knowing it. That said, it is important to us to ensure our materials share information in a respectful manner. Please let us know what you hear!

**4. Suicide is a personal choice—it's your right to end your life. Who am I to intervene?**

Some people attempt suicide after a lot of deliberation and are virtually certain their life is no longer worth living. But most are ambivalent, and many attempt during a crisis. Over half of attempters report less than an hour passed between deciding on suicide and making the attempt, according to a number of studies. Often people who have survived serious attempts say something like: "The moment I jumped I said to myself, 'What did I just do? I don't want to die.'" Also, last year over 10,000 people in their teens and twenties killed themselves in the U.S.—far too young an age to give up on life.

**5. Does relocating the guns for a while *always* work?**

There are no guarantees. But it's a simple step to make things safer. Reducing a suicidal person's access to guns and other lethal means is only one part of a broader suicide prevention plan. Getting professional help and the support of other family and friends is strongly advised. The Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Those who are actively suicidal are best protected by not being left alone until they are feeling better.

**6. Could I be sued if I refuse to make a sale to someone who passes the background check?**

The two largest gun shops in NH and ME have never been sued for this reason. As firearm retailers, we are NOT violating 2nd amendment rights by refusing a purchase or rental if we suspect something isn't right; it is well within our legal rights to deny a transaction (as long as this denial is not simply based on a person's race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or sex). In fact, there have been instances where store owners have been sued by the family of someone who purchased a firearm and killed themselves soon after.

*More on back*

**7. Customers could be acting funny for other reasons besides suicide—first-time customers are often a little nervous and don't know anything about guns.**

It's hard to know for sure if someone is suicidal. The Tip Sheet is meant to help you and your staff identify customers with warning signs. Usually new customers are eager to hear advice from staff, and will gladly respond to questions that retailers ask as we try to help them select the best firearm for their purposes. It's those who are reluctant to talk about the purchase, or who seem to be troubled, who require extra caution. You should "go with your gut" and your experience.

**8. I have had a customer purchase a gun for suicide, and he didn't exhibit ANY warning signs at all. You can't always spot people who are suicidal.**

We agree, some suicidal customers won't show any outward signs, and firearm retailers aren't mind readers. But there have been occasions when a dealer asked a person who seemed shaky whether they should really be buying this gun, and they admitted they were considering suicide. One family wrote our co-Chair (former owner of Riley's Sports Shop) and said that his question saved their mother's life. The more ambivalent someone is about suicide, the greater the opportunity for intervention. We can't save everyone, but we can save some.

**9. The Tip Sheet says over 1-in-20 firearm suicides were with guns purchased within a week, usually the same day. What's that based on?**

The information comes from the NH Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, which investigates every suicide death. The reports that investigators file will sometimes note, for example, that they found a receipt for the gun at the death scene, or a family member reported that the victim just bought the gun.

**10. What do I say to a customer who keeps a gun at home for self-defense but is worried a family member is suicidal?**

Protecting the people we love means knowing the biggest threats to their safety. This can change over time. When a person is struggling with a mental health or drug/alcohol problem, suicide is usually the bigger risk than a serious attack. In New Hampshire, suicides outnumber homicides 15-to-1. Gun owners can make the wisest gun storage decisions when they weigh their own family's risk of attack with their risk of suicide. When someone is going through a rough time, storing guns away from home—or making sure they have no access to household guns—might be the wisest choice until the person recovers. For other ways to help the person, call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 or NH Rapid Response: Call/Text 833-710-6477.

## **OTHER QUESTIONS?**

Visit [www.nhfsc.org](http://www.nhfsc.org)