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# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Testimony of Rep. Victoria Doudera presenting LD 2119,  
**“An Act to Support Suicide Prevention by Allowing the Voluntary Waiver of  
Firearm Rights”**

March 5, 2024

Greetings Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary. My name is Vicki Doudera and I represent House District 41, which includes Camden and Rockport. I am here today to present LD 2119 “An Act to Support Suicide Prevention by Allowing the Voluntary Waiver of Firearm Rights.”

Suicide is a public health crisis. Maine’s suicide rate is consistently higher than the national average, and in 2021, nearly 89 percent of Maine’s firearm deaths were suicides. Suicide attempts are often impulsive acts, and a majority of people who attempt suicide do NOT go on to die by suicide. But those who reach for a gun during suicidal crises rarely have a second chance.

According to the Harvard School of Public Health:

- Many suicide attempts occur with little planning during a short-term crisis.
- Intent isn’t all that determines whether an attempter lives or dies; means also matter.
- 90% of attempters who survive do NOT go on to die by suicide later.
- Access to firearms is a risk factor for suicide.
- Firearms used in youth suicide usually belong to a parent.
- Reducing access to lethal means saves lives.

There are several policy measures that can help stop firearm suicide. One measure that is gaining traction around the country is this bill – a voluntary gun relinquishment law. With this legislation, a person may waive his or her right to purchase or receive a firearm by filing a voluntary and confidential waiver of firearm rights form. The voluntary waiver may also be revoked at a later date. In a nutshell, the bill helps empower suicidal people to act to promote their own health and safety by limiting their access to guns during mental crises.

When I spoke with a gun shop owner in Auburn about this bill, he noted that it is similar to what happens in casinos with people who have a gambling problem. They are able to put themselves on a list so that they do not have the ability to engage in a behavior that is unhealthy for them. As a gentleman who testified for this bill in another state said,

“This bill would give people prone to suicidality the agency to make decisions about their own access to guns during periods when they are not actively suicidal. I have mental clarity most of the time, but I know the storms will come again. I want to have the ability to preempt crises. I want to have the ability to protect myself from the version of me that is not thinking clearly. People who are prone to suicidal thoughts and behaviors need this bill, which allows us to protect ourselves from our unwell selves. We need this policy, which gives us the agency to make preemptive decisions about our own health. Please, give us the tools to preserve our lives.”

Three states – Utah, Virginia, and Washington – have enacted this legislation, also called “Donna’s Law.” It is the brainchild of Law Professor Fred Vars of the University of Alabama and Katrina Brees, whose mother, Donna Nathan, is the bill’s namesake. The bill is working: about a hundred people have signed up in the states where it is already on the books, and many more people want to participate. In one study, 46% of people receiving psychiatric care said they would sign up.

Donna’s Law protects the vulnerable by allowing registrants to add their name to a do-not-sell list, and it also allows them to change their minds later by requesting removal. It protects privacy by securing personal information and preventing employment, education and other discrimination based on participation.

It is my hope that by allowing individuals to voluntarily and confidentially add their own names to the system and thereby prevent their own future gun purchases during a suicidal crisis, we might help reduce suicide rates in our state. (As the Sept. 26 suicide of a woman at Maine Military Supply in Holden unfortunately demonstrates, not all Mainers who commit suicide by firearm already have access to a gun.)

The costs to society of suicide are staggering. Suicide cost Maine a total of \$211,089,000 combined lifetime medical and work loss in 2010, or an average of \$1,134,885 per suicide death. It takes an extremely heavy emotional and physical toll on families, communities and first responders. This bill will not solve the whole problem, but it is a measure that could help.

You have before you an amended version which makes a few technical changes to the bill, suggested by Lt. Matt Casavant of the Maine State Police. Another change is the addition of a civil penalty if an individual attempts to purchase while on the list. This is a requirement made by the FBI for states to use the federal NICS background check system for Donna’s Law. Keep in mind that the goal of this legislation is prevention, not punishment – that is why only a small civil penalty is included. The language says “a fine of no more than \$100 may be adjudged.”

Another part of the amendment is the addition of a second policy measure that can help prevent firearm suicides, and that is safe storage. In my discussions with several gun shop owners, I learned that they are often asked, and would be willing, to safely and securely store customers’ firearms if their liability for doing so was addressed. Why would gun shop owners be asked to hold guns for people? The non-profit organization “Hold My Guns” promotes voluntary firearm storage and says there are many practical scenarios in which customers would like a federal firearm licensee to store their firearms, including “during a sale of a home, while away on

vacation, while a household member or guest is prohibited from being around firearms, during military deployment, when providing emergency housing to an at risk foster child, etc.” They say that other scenarios might include during “volatile times such as during a divorce, when a household member who normally might access firearms is experiencing depression, or when a household member is going through a mental health or medical treatment that would increase their risk for harming themselves or harming others.”

These are all incredibly valid times for safe storage to come into play, and if a person does not have a trusted friend or family member to help them securely keep firearms, a local gun shop who is willing to hold guns is an excellent alternative. Hence the second part of this bill, which releases them from liability.

Thank you for your consideration of these two policy measures designed to help reduce firearm suicide in our state, and I am happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Victoria W. Doudera". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Rep. Vicki Doudera