

Testimony in support of LD 759 April 21, 2021

My name is Melissa Burch. I am a pediatrician in Bangor.

The experience that sparked my interest in safe firearm storage happened more than twenty years ago.

I was called to the ER to see a two-year-old who had been shot. She and a five-year-old brother had been left alone in the vehicle in a parking lot while the parent was gone for five minutes. The five-year-old had picked up the loaded handgun from under the front seat of the pickup and pulled the trigger. The bullet struck the two year old girl in the leg. In the ER after the child was stabilized, I wondered aloud to with one of the other doctors, “who would leave a loaded gun under the seat with kids around?” He looked back at me and said, “I always have a loaded gun in my truck—you never know when you might need it.”

I was stunned by this man’s disregard for childhood safety and this incident remains vivid for me. This childhood shooting didn’t happen in Maine. But it could. Maine kids do continue to be at risk when the adults around them don’t store guns safely.

There are two distinct groups of kids at risk.

Younger, curious kids are the first group.. Many of you are parents and you remember visits with your pediatrician or family doctor when the kids were little. How are the medications and cleaning products stored? Do you have outlet covers? Safe firearm storage is a routine part of this conversation.

But still, not every firearm is stored safely. We are all aware of the recent tragedy in Waterville. In our practice we have a child who survived a gunshot to the neck when she was four years old but will spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair. Both families will be changed forever. Both tragedies would have been avoided with safe storage.

The second group at risk is adolescents. Maine already has a high rate of teen suicide and COVID 19 has made things much worse. Of the many depressed teens I have seen just since the pandemic began, at least two had known access to unsecured firearms. In both cases, family members were very resistant to safeguarding these weapons. Is it ever worth it to have a loaded handgun in the nightstand when there is a depressed teen in the home? LD 759 would make it clear that this is never okay.

This bill is about child safety. Parents can keep kids safe by covering electric outlets, putting gates around the woodstove, and locking medications, and safe firearm storage is essential too. Keeping firearms unloaded, locked, and out of the reach of children and teens is the right thing to do. It should be the law. As a pediatrician, I ask you to vote FOR LD 759.

Melissa Burch  
Maine chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics

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