

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, I am Dr. Miles Kirby, and I live in Yarmouth, Maine. I was born and raised in Penobscot County and am a proud Mainer. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am speaking today in favor of LD 759.

I speak first as an epidemiologist and public health professional. As a researcher at Harvard University, I study environments and how to create safer places for children to be born into and grow up in. Specifically, I study risk factors and behaviors that endanger children's wellbeing, such as contaminated drinking water, poor indoor air quality, and environments that can contribute to unintentional injuries. While the risks of poor environments are often experienced over years and have subtle effects on health, sometimes environments are life threatening in an immediate way, such as when a generator is used indoors spiking carbon monoxide to fatal levels.... or when a child has easy access to a firearm.

One of the best parts of my job is working to find interventions and behavioral solutions to make homes safer. I collect raw data, design surveys, review medical records, analyze statistics, and try to make sense of what the data say. I also try to listen to people's stories and ideas for change, as all too often it's easy to forget the faces and personal stories represented by statistics. Today you have probably heard, or will hear, lots of numbers and statistics about firearm storage, unintended injuries, youth suicides, and the success stories of other states that have enacted gun storage laws and saw reductions in gun-related deaths. But you will also hear personal stories.

As an epidemiologist, I'm used to looking at data and hemming and hawing, finding different ways data can be interpreted or biased in the first place, dwelling on the ambiguities and uncertainties of research, scrutinizing the pros and cons of different study designs. But when it comes to laws that encourage safe gun storage, the evidence for benefits are clear and compelling. Safer storage works, and can reduce firearm-related deaths. The evidence for safer storage leading to reductions in adolescent suicide is especially convincing.

Rather than share statistics now, I would like to share a story as a father. I have one daughter, and my son is due to arrive this week. My daughter loves to explore her surroundings. She has a pair of homemade cardboard binoculars and loves to search for and handle unusual objects she finds, both outdoors and indoors. She looks under rocks, she opens drawers. I also have close family that hunt and visit gun ranges most weekends. Firearms are a normal sight in their vehicles and houses. And unfortunately I have seen first-hand the dangers of improperly stored firearms. I remember in one relative's house, right around the time my daughter was starting to walk and explore on her own, I came across a handgun kept in an unlocked night stand. It was less than 1 foot off the floor, and it took only a second to open and find. It was loaded. I will never forget that moment, and the horrible realization that her tiny hands could have easily grasped it and hurt herself or another person.

I know that laws can change behavior, and LD759 can be an important tool for making Maine safer for our children. With that in mind, I urge you to vote in favor of this bill. Secondly, I know that personal, loving conversations with friends and family members are also effective. I urge you to talk with them about safer storage and creating safer homes – the time is now. Thank you for your time and listening to my testimony.