



STATE OF DELAWARE
STATE COUNCIL FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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The Honorable John Carney
Governor

John McNeal
SCPD Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 10, 2021

TO: All Members of the Delaware State Senate
and House of Representatives

FROM: Terri Hancharick – Chairperson TH
State Council for Persons with Disabilities

RE: H.B. 55 (Gun Shop Project)

The State Council for Persons with Disabilities (SCPD) has reviewed H.B. 55, which seeks to establish the Delaware Gun Shop Project, which would operate under the oversight of the Delaware Suicide Prevention Coalition. SCPD endorses the proposed legislation but recommends that it be made more robust and expansive. Council has the following observations.

As referenced in the synopsis of the bill, the first Gun Shop Project was formed in New Hampshire in 2009 (more information about the Gun Shop Project model and existing projects in other states can be found on the Harvard School for Public Health's "Means Matter" website: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/gun-shop-project/>). Following this model, the Gun Shop Project would encourage collaboration between the Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health (DSAMH) and owners of gun shops to increase awareness of suicide risk factors and prevention strategies.

The bill references the grave statistic that while “firearms are used in less than 6% of suicide attempts... firearms are used in over half of suicide deaths.” To address this problem, the Delaware Gun Shop Project would “develop and create suicide prevention education materials,” which would include both written materials and an online training course. The Gun Shop Project would also be required to ensure the availability of those materials online. There is no language in the bill indicating that use of the materials or completing any of the Project’s educational programming would be required of gun shop owners or integrated into any component of the licensure process for gun shops; participation on the part of gun shops would be completely voluntary. The Gun Shop Project would be staffed by DSAMH, and the Project would be required to submit an annual report detailing its activities. House Amendment 1 as passed clarified that the Gun Shop Project would only be required to distribute its own informational materials and would only be required to make them available online as opposed to by delivery to physical locations. House Amendment 1 also removed references to individuals applying for licenses to carry concealed deadly weapons as gun shops are not directly involved in that process.

There does not seem to be substantial available data that demonstrates Gun Shop Projects in other states have directly led to a reduction in suicides using firearms; however, they have been touted for raising awareness about gun safety and suicide prevention among gun shop owners and potential gun purchasers. Additionally, some national groups such as the Mental Health Association (MHA) have also endorsed suicide prevention outreach to gun shops as a means of reducing gun violence without unfairly stigmatizing people with mental health disabilities (see, e.g., MHA Position Statement No. 72, available at: <https://www.mhanational.org/issues/position-statement-72-violence-community-mental-health-response>).

It has been widely reported that gun sales significantly increased in 2020 following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and increased social unrest; The Guardian reported that as of October 30, 2020, more than 17 million guns had been sold in the U.S. during the 2020 calendar year (see Lois Beckett, “Americans have bought record 17m guns in year of unrest, analysis finds,” The Guardian, Oct, 30, 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/29/coronavirus-pandemic-americans-gun-sales>). While it is too soon to know the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on suicide rates, the long-term impacts of increased isolation and uncertainty on mental health have been cause for concern among experts. Some data indicates that while overall suicide rates have not significantly

spiked since the onset of the pandemic, suicide rates for certain populations, particularly in Black communities, has increased more sharply (see Kim Tingley, “Will the Pandemic Result in More Suicides?” New York Times Magazine, Jan. 21, 2021, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/magazine/will-the-pandemic-result-in-more-suicides.html>).

Partnership between mental health practitioners and gun shops seems like a potentially effective way to target prospective gun buyers who are contemplating suicide or have a person who is at risk in their household without unnecessarily targeting or stigmatizing people who identify as having a mental illness. It does not appear that all states with Gun Shop Projects have laws specifically creating them; however, enacting legislation would potentially be one way to address needed funding. One concern would be that without further incentive to participate, there is no guarantee that gun shops will buy in to the Project’s mission or actively seek out the Project’s materials, though some anecdotal information indicates that gun shop owners in other states have been receptive to outreach efforts (see, e.g., Roni Caryn Rabin, “‘How Did We Not Know?’ Gun Owners Confront a Suicide Epidemic” New York Times, Nov. 17, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/health/suicide-guns-prevention.html>).

Thank you for your consideration and please contact SCPD if you have any questions or comments regarding our position and observations on the proposed legislation.

cc: Ms. Laura Waterland, Esq.
Governor’s Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens
Developmental Disabilities Council

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