

Wisconsin Council on Mental Health - Statement on Firearm-Related Legislation

In 2015, the most recent year for which we have data, Wisconsin lost 874 individuals to suicide. About half of those who die by suicide use a firearm. Reducing access to firearms is one of the strongest evidence-based practices for reducing suicide. See additional data below.

The WCMH supports firearm-related legislation that can be reasonably assumed to reduce firearm deaths by suicide based on reputable, peer-reviewed research or experience with similar legislation in other states. We oppose legislation that would potentially increase firearm deaths by suicide based on similar factors. This statement serves to facilitate WCMH action on such legislation, especially in situations where a rapid response is required. It does not prohibit the WCMH from supporting legislation that does not meet these requirements through the usual motion process.

Any such legislation:

- ✓ Must not single out individuals for firearm restrictions based solely on the presence of a mental illness. Such legislation is discriminatory and contributes to the stigma surrounding mental illnesses. The legislation must either be universal or be targeted to individuals who demonstrably exhibit behaviors representing an imminent risk of harm to themselves.
- ✓ Must assure due process if removal of firearms from an individual is allowed. The legislation must also specify the process by which the individual may regain their firearms or their ability to purchase firearms in a timeframe appropriate to the reason for the removal.

The types of legislation that we have identified that currently would be supported under this motion include:

- ✓ Waiting periods for the purchase of firearms.
- ✓ Universal background checks.
- ✓ Licensing/permitting requirements for ownership of firearms.
- ✓ Legislation limiting the open carrying of firearms.
- ✓ Gun lock requirements.
- ✓ Lethal violence protection orders.
- ✓ Self-exclusion by voluntarily putting name on background check registry.

The WCMH is not opposed to gun ownership but is cognizant of prudent limitations on ownership that can reduce suicides. We also recognize and support efforts that individuals and communities can take to reduce access to firearms for people at risk. These include:

- ✓ Promoting the use of gun locks and gun safes to ensure that firearms in homes are not a risk to others in the home.

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- ✓ Promoting the removal of firearms from the home when an individual in the home is experiencing suicidality or a mental health crisis.
- ✓ Promoting Counseling on Access to Lethal Means by health and mental health care professionals when working with a client who is suicidal.
- ✓ Working with gun shop owners to post information about help for individuals who are suicidal and making sure their staff know how to recognize and respond to signs of suicidality in their customers

The WCMH points to the following data in support of this statement:

- ✓ According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Means Matter project:
 - 82% of youth who died by suicide used a firearm belonging to a family member, usually a parent.
 - Higher rates of gun ownership are associated with higher suicide rates.
 - Guns are of special concern because of their lethality. The suicide fatality rate is 82.5% using firearms as opposed to 61.4% from hanging and 1.5% from drug/poison ingestion.
- ✓ Research by Dr. Michael Anestis published in the American Journal of Public Health found that:
 - States with the following laws had a firearm suicide rate about half that of states without these laws resulting in an overall reduction in suicide rates in those states. This study controlled for poverty, education, race/ethnicity, age, and population density, factors which could confound the correlations:
 - Waiting periods for the purchase of firearms.
 - Universal background checks.
 - Legislation limiting the open carry of firearms.
 - Gun lock requirements.
 - In a separate study, also published in the American Journal of Public Health, Dr. Anestis found that states with the following laws in place, on average, have lower overall suicide rates, lower firearm suicide rates, and lower percent of suicides due to firearms:
 - Permit to purchase a handgun
 - Registration of handguns
 - License to own a handgun
 - In a 2017 study Dr. Anestis found that from 1999-2015 firearm-related suicide deaths increased significantly more slowly in states that had universal background checks or waiting periods for purchase.

- ✓ A study of Connecticut's lethal violence protection order (the first enacted in the US) by Dr. Jeffrey Swanson and colleagues found the following:
 - We calculated the number (within a range) of additional fatalities that would have occurred if these individuals had retained their guns and attempted suicide with a firearm instead of using some less lethal method. In this manner, we estimated that approximately 10 to 20 gun seizures were carried out for every 1 suicide averted.
- ✓ A study published in 2016 in *Suicide and Life Threatening Behaviors* 46% of individuals in a psychiatric setting indicated they would voluntarily put their name on a "do not sell" list for firearms, supporting the likelihood that creating such an option could reduce suicides.

Willingness of Mentally Ill Individuals to Sign Up for a Novel Proposal to Prevent Firearm Suicide

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The study goal was to determine whether a significant number of high suicide risk individuals would confidentially put their own names onto a list to prevent future gun purchases. An anonymous written survey was administered in an inpatient psychiatric unit and two outpatient psychiatric clinics at an academic medical center. Two hundred forty individuals were approached to fill out the survey, of whom 200 (83.3%) did so. Forty-six percent of participants stated that they would put their own name onto the list. This novel suicide prevention proposal, a Do-Not-Sell List, would appeal to many people at high risk for suicide.

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