

Letters to the Editor

Firearms Policy and Suicide Prevention

TO THE EDITOR: The recent article by Olfson and colleagues (1), published in the August 2017 issue of the *Journal*, confirms markedly elevated suicide rates following nonfatal self-harm. An accompanying editorial (2) recommends removing firearms from the home of a person who has attempted suicide in order to mitigate this risk. The legality of this recommendation, however, might depend on state laws regulating firearm transfers. For example, universal background check laws might present legal obstacles to temporary firearm transfers during a suicidal crisis unless specific exceptions to the universal background check exist in case law or statute (3). Here, I describe the collaborative approach taken in Washington State to amend an existing universal background check law with exceptions to facilitate temporary firearm transfers during periods of elevated suicide risk.

In 2016, a work group with representation from the Alliance for Gun Responsibility, Forefront Suicide Prevention, the National Rifle Association, the Second Amendment Foundation, the Washington State Office of the Attorney General, Washington State Patrol, and the Washington State Psychiatric Association was formed to discuss amending the universal background check law (RCW 9.41.113). Together with a state legislator, the group reached unanimous agreement on language allowing for an exception to the need for a background check if all the following criteria were met:

- The temporary transfer is intended to prevent suicide.
- The temporary transfer lasts only as long as reasonably necessary to prevent death.
- The firearm is not utilized by the transferee for any purpose for the duration of the temporary transfer.

The group also proposed expanding the list of family members who could receive a gift or loan of a firearm to include parents-in-law and siblings-in-law. This change recognized that men account for approximately 85% of firearm suicide deaths in Washington (4), and a suicidal man's wife or sister might engage her father, brother, or husband (an in-law to the man at risk) for assistance in removing a firearm.

With its broad base of support, the consensus language raised little controversy in the legislature and was signed into law in May 2017 as part of Senate Bill 5552.

Given the high lethality of firearms, removing a gun from the home of a suicidal person may indeed save a life. It is therefore imperative that psychiatrists become familiar with laws related to firearm transfers during a suicidal crisis and advocate for policies that facilitate this means of improving

safety. Our experience in Washington confirms that collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including firearms organizations, is essential to the success of this advocacy.

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Facilitating Temporary, Safe Firearms Restrictions Among Individuals at High Risk of Suicide: Response to Sung

TO THE EDITOR: Over the last decade, deaths by suicide in the United States have increased by roughly 2% per year (1), and firearms have accounted for roughly half of all suicide deaths (2). Despite average suicide rates by international standards, the firearms suicide rate is eight times greater in the United States than in other high-income countries (3). In this context, it is critically important to develop public policies that restrict individuals at high risk of suicide from access to firearms.

We applaud the successful efforts of Dr. Sung and the Washington State Psychiatric Association in working with a wide range of stakeholders to amend Washington State law concerning firearm transfers during suicidal crises. Universal background checks, particularly when paired with mandatory waiting periods, are associated with significant reductions in statewide suicide rates (4). Nevertheless, because several states also require background checks of friends or family members before receiving voluntary firearm transfers from suicidal individuals (5), this aspect of universal background checks can impede potentially lifesaving firearm transfers. In addition to legislation requiring universal background checks, complementary legislation such as the Washington State statute