Education to Action: Firearm Policy for Suicide Prevention

Lethal Means & Public Policy Toolkit
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About the Authoring Organizations

The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) has partnered with Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions as both organizations are in support of equitable and actionable public policies and programs that reduce access to firearms during acute suicidal crisis. AAS is the nation’s largest suicide prevention membership organization. The AAS believes in the promotion of research and effective public policy—not only for mental health professionals, but also for the public—addressing the critical gap in science-to-practice. The membership of AAS includes mental health and public health professionals, researchers, suicide prevention and crisis intervention centers, school districts, crisis center volunteers, survivors of suicide loss, attempt survivors, and a variety of lay persons who have an interest in suicide prevention.

The Center for Gun Violence Solutions at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health conducts rigorous research and uses advocacy to implement evidence-based, equitable policies and programs that will prevent gun violence in our communities. The Center for Gun Violence Solutions combines the expertise of the country’s most respected gun violence researchers with the skills of the nation’s most experienced gun violence prevention advocates. We develop and apply scientific research to identify a range of innovative gun violence solutions and advocate for systemic changes. This combination creates a unique opportunity to turn public health research into policy action that reduces all forms of gun violence and saves lives. Because gun violence disproportionately impacts communities of color, we ground our work in equity and seek insights from those most impacted on appropriate solutions. Using the best available science, our Center works towards expanding evidence-based advocacy and policy-making efforts.
Suicide is a serious public health concern that can have lasting harmful effects on individuals, families, and communities. Due to their nature, firearms are uniquely lethal in a suicidal crisis. Firearms account for a little more than half of all suicide deaths in the United States, accounting for 64 deaths a day.\(^1\) Firearms are inherently deadly - 90% of suicide attempts involving a firearm resulting in death.\(^2\) Comparatively, suffocation (51%) and poisoning (2%) have much lower-case fatality rates. In addition to inherent deadliness, ease of use, accessibility, ability to abort mid-attempt and acceptability to the attempter contribute to the lethality of suicide methods.\(^3\) Research shows that suicidal crises are often time-limited events. A study that interviewed suicide attempt survivors found that nearly 1 in 4 attempted suicide in less than five minutes from making the decision to attempt, with 24% reporting 5-19 minutes and 23% reporting 20 minutes to 1 hour.\(^4\) Firearms are present in over one-third of all American households, meaning that highly lethal suicide attempt methods are widely accessible across the country.\(^5\)
Firearm access increases one’s capability of dying by suicide. Risk for death by suicide increases five-fold when there is a firearm in the home and unsafe storage increases suicide risk as well. Less than half of gun-owning households report storing their firearms safely. Means safety - efforts to make methods for suicide less deadly or less available during a suicide attempt - represents a practical, effective approach for preventing suicide deaths. Common means safety strategies include storing a firearm locked, unloaded, and separate from ammunition. Reducing access to lethal means has proven to be an important tool for preventing suicide deaths. When a person in crisis does not have access to a specific suicide method, substitution for another method is unlikely. Creating time and space between a person in crisis and lethal means saves lives.

One example of the effectiveness of reducing access to lethal means is the implementation of blister packaging in the UK. Policymakers passed legislation requiring paracetamol (acetaminophen) to be sold in blister packs and reduced the number of pills allowed to be sold per pack. After the policy passed, paracetamol overdoses declined by 20% and salicylates overdoses declined by 39%. Evaluation of suicide deaths and attempts in years following the legislation found that there was not a substitution effect and there was also an observed reduction in morbidity associated with acetaminophen suicide attempts. Review of non-fatal overdoses showed the number of tablets used in attempts significantly decreased after the legislation. Reducing the number of pills sold per pack helped reduce the availability of lethal doses and the time needed to access a lethal dose of pills in blister packaging made lethal doses even less accessible and allowed time to pass through the crisis period.

The impact of lethal means safety often has hinged on the lethality, popularity, and accessibility of one’s chosen method. As such, suicide prevention efforts in the United States would benefit from advocacy and action for evidence-informed public policy addressing access to lethal means, specifically firearms. We recognize public policy that addresses firearm access and supports safe storage practices impacts suicide deaths and attempts. We also recognize that the potential of policy approaches to suicide prevention are not fully realized in the field of suicidology, thus advocating for lethal means safety policy approaches may be new for suicidologists and suicide prevention advocates. This toolkit aims to address the need for policy approaches to reduce firearm access as a suicide prevention tool and provide actionable steps for individuals who want to advocate for such policy approaches. Brief overviews of evidence-based and evidence-informed policy approaches to firearm suicide prevention are provided as well as strategies for advocacy and engagement.

For additional information on firearm suicide and preventing it, visit preventfirearmsuicide.org.
Extreme Risk Laws

Extreme risk laws, also known as extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs), are civil orders that allow specified petitioners to file a petition with the court to temporarily remove firearms and the ability to purchase firearms from a person (respondent) who is a danger to themselves or others. Currently, nineteen states and the District of Columbia have extreme risk laws in place. People able to file extreme risk petitions (petitioners) vary by state, but include family members, dating partners, people with a child in common, people who are living together, legal guardians, law enforcement, healthcare professionals, school administrators, states and/or district attorneys, and attorneys within the office of the attorney general. The criteria judges consider when granting or denying an extreme risk protection order may vary by state but generally includes: recent acts or threats of violence towards self or others, history of threatening or dangerous behavior, convictions of domestic violence misdemeanors and/or other violent misdemeanors, history of or current risky alcohol or controlled substance use, recent violation of a domestic violence protective order, unlawful or reckless use, display, or brandishing of a firearm, recent acquisition of firearms, ammunition, or other deadly weapons, and cruelty to animals. Though the process may differ depending on the state, generally, the process is as follows:

1. An eligible petitioner files a temporary ERPO petition.
2. The court accepts or rejects the ERPO petition.
3. Law enforcement serves the ERPO to the respondent, removes firearms or, depending on the state, give the respondent an opportunity to turn in the firearm, and updates the background check system.
4. A final ERPO hearing is held and the respondent is allowed to challenge the petition.
5. The court may reject the petition or grant the final ERPO to last up to one year.
6. When the ERPO expires, the respondent may request their firearms from law enforcement and the background check system will be updated.
One study found that between 1999 and 2013, there were 762 firearm removal cases under Connecticut’s extreme risk law. Firearms were found in 99% of cases with an average of seven guns removed per respondent. Suicide or self-injury was listed as a concern in at least 61% of cases where the cause of concern was available. For every 10-20 firearm removals issued, one life was saved.

A study found that between 2006 and 2013, there were 395 firearm removal cases issued under Indiana’s extreme risk law. 1079 firearms were temporarily removed. In 70% of cases, suicide was cited as the reason the order was issued. One suicide was prevented for every 10 firearm removals issued.

For more information on ERPO, visit americanhealth.jhu.edu/implementERPO.


Permit-to-purchase, or firearm licensing laws, help strengthen background check requirements by requiring individuals who want to buy a firearm to undergo a background check, apply in person, submit information directly to law enforcement, complete a firearms safety course, and wait for the application to be processed before acquiring a gun. Most states with permit-to-purchase policies require applicants to complete an approved firearm safety course, which has been associated with an increased likelihood that a gun owner will store their gun properly. On average, the firearm licensing approval process takes 30 days. The built-in waiting period places time and distance between a person in crisis and lethal means. Analysis of state-level mandatory waiting periods found that waiting periods were associated with a 7-11% reduction in firearm suicides between 1970 and 2014, roughly equating to about 22-35 fewer suicides for the average state annually.

### Outcomes

**Between 1996 and 2017, Connecticut’s handgun licensing law was associated with a 33% decrease in the firearm suicide rate.**

**The 2007 repeal of Missouri’s handgun licensing law was associated with a 47.3% increase in the firearm suicide rate between 2007 and 2016.**

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Child Access Prevention (CAP) laws hold gun owners criminally liable if a child accesses an unsecured firearm. CAP laws may increase awareness and shift social norms around firearm access and safer storage, encouraging gun owners to adopt and implement safer storage practices. Between 1976 and 2001, CAP laws were associated with an 8% decrease in suicide rates among 14- to 17-year-olds in eighteen states.  

Voluntary self-prohibition is a relatively new policy that holds promise as a policy approach for firearm suicide prevention. Voluntary self-prohibition allows individuals to place themselves on a do-not-buy list that enters their name into the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, preventing their purchasing of firearms. Currently, Virginia and Washington are the only states with a voluntary self-prohibition policy. Because of the policy’s recent inception, research is needed to evaluate the impact of the policy on suicide rates. One study surveyed individuals at inpatient and outpatient psychiatric clinics to assess their willingness to sign up for a voluntary self-prohibition list. 46% of study participants indicated they would put their name on a do-not-buy list, though they were less likely to sign up if they had access to a firearm.

There are somewhat different processes for making laws at the state and federal level. Here, we will discuss the state lawmaking process, and we highlight the areas where you can act. Your state’s Legislature or General Assembly is the branch of state government that makes laws for your specific state. Each state follows specific steps, which you can learn more about on your legislature’s website. Most states only make laws during a limited legislative session period; however, some states have legislatures that meet year-round, and legislation can also be made during extraordinary, or special, sessions, called by the Governor or legislators. The following is a general overview of the steps for a bill to become a law:

1. Community members and advocacy groups approach their state representative/delegate or senator with a concern and/or an idea of how a concern can be addressed. This generally occurs before the legislative session.

   **TAKE ACTION:**
   
   You can call, write, or meet with your elected officials to discuss the issues that are most important to you and the reasons why laws need to be enacted or changed. You can also work with advocacy groups that care about similar issues to draft potential bills for your legislator to introduce.

2. A representative/delegate or senator introduces a bill, often inspired by a constituent or advocacy group. Bills can be introduced to: (1) create a new law; (2) make changes to an existing law; or (3) repeal an existing law.

   **TAKE ACTION:**
   
   You can read the bills that have been introduced and reach out to your elected official to provide support or opposition. You can also provide specific suggestions to improve upon the bill. It is common for bills at this stage to be revised based on feedback from community members or other stakeholders.
3. The bill is assigned a number and assigned (referred) to the appropriate committee within the General Assembly. The committee is a group of legislators that meet to consider bills by topic area – such as public safety, transportation or education – and hear public testimony before taking action.

Note: Nebraska is the only state with a unicameral legislature. Laws are made solely within their state senate.

**TAKE ACTION:**

Many states offer online tools to create personal lists to track the legislative status of bills and receive updates.

4. After the bill has been referred to the committee, the members of the designated committee consider the bill to decide which action to take. Generally, the representative or senator who introduced the bill— the bill’s sponsor— appears before the committee to speak about why they think it is needed. Representatives may invite experts or constituents to provide testimony for or against the bill. These committee hearings are open to the public, and anyone has the right to attend and to speak about legislation. After testimony has been provided, committee members may vote for the bill. If the bill receives a majority of committee member votes it will be referred to the House or Senate scheduling committee. These standing committee hearings are generally the most important part of the legislative process, and the point where your participation is essential.

**TAKE ACTION:**

You can attend committee hearings and participate by providing testimony for or against a bill. You do not need any special qualifications to testify. The testimony can be as simple as telling the committee your name and that you support or oppose the bill. You can also provide a short statement or story about why you support or oppose a specific bill. You do not have to testify to show your support. You can show your support for a bill simply by showing up for a hearing with a group of advocates.
5. If the committee decides to recommend the bill for passage, it goes either directly to the full legislative chamber it was introduced in or in some cases it first goes to the appropriate scheduling committee. Here, the bill will be scheduled for debate and amendment in the chamber in which it was introduced. Some states have requirements on how many times the title of a bill must be read or appear in the printed calendar before it is put to vote.

TAKE ACTION:

You can follow your bill’s progress through your state’s online legislative website. You can advocate for support or opposition to a bill by communicating by phone, letter or email to your representatives. Finally, you can attend the vote on the bill to show your support or opposition.

If passed, the bill is sent to the other legislative chamber. (Bills passed in the Senate will go to the House of Representatives, bills passed in the House of Representatives will go to the Senate.) There, the bill goes through essentially the same procedure as it did in the chamber of origin. The bill is referred to a committee, considered with opportunity for public testimony and reported (passed) by the committee. If both chambers pass the bill without amendment, it is sent to the governor.

TAKE ACTION:

You can engage in the same ways listed above as the bill progresses through the other legislative chamber. The options below vary by state and some options may not be available depending on your location.

Once the bill is on the governor’s desk, they have four options:

- Sign the bill into law;
- Veto the bill (which may be able overridden by a vote of the Senate and House. Check your state website for specifics);
- Depending on your state laws, a failure to sign the bill by the governor could result in the bill passing or the bill being vetoed. Check your state website for specifics.
Unless otherwise specified in the legislation, most states have default rules that govern when new laws go into effect.

**Track Legislation**

When you are advocating for policy and meeting with your legislators, it is good to stay informed. Many states offer online tools to create personal lists to track the legislative status of bills and receive updates. Using the search tool, you can browse through bills by number, legislative sponsor, subject, or keyword.

Find out about your state legislative session and what policies are being considered. Use your state legislature website to find out when your state’s legislative session is being held and track suicide prevention policy being considered in committee.
Prepare and Practice Your Elevator Speech

Because you never know when you might be asked to talk about what really matters to you, be ready with an elevator speech! An elevator speech is a clear, brief message you want to share, usually ending with an ask, or a call to take action. Your activism elevator speech says who you are, what you’re passionate about and what you’re looking for. Preparing and practicing your elevator speech helps you prepare for public speaking engagements and telling your story effectively.

An elevator speech is quick – usually 30 seconds or less – designed to be delivered in the time it takes to ride from the bottom floor to the top of a building in an elevator. It can be hard to get your message out quickly and it is important to prepare and practice.

12-second sample speech:
The American Association of Suicidology is a membership-based organization of clinicians, researchers, crisis service professionals, public health and elected officials engaging communities in reducing suicide throughout the US. Will you stand with us on preventing firearm suicide?

30-second speech - write your own!
You can say a lot in just thirty seconds, so what do you want people to hear? Take the time to think about what is important to you - we recommend writing it down and then practicing until you’re confident speaking without your notes. This way, when you have the opportunity to speak about the issues you’re passionate about, you’ll be ready.
Connect with Your Elected Officials

Your elected officials’ job is to represent you at the various levels of government. You can meet with or call them or their staff to advocate for issues that are important to you. For state-level legislators, you can go to the Capitol during session or better yet, meet with them closer to home at their district office at any time of the year. Talking with their assistant is often the best way to reach them. Meetings can be over the phone, through video conferencing or in person. This section of the toolkit focuses on meetings with state-level legislators, but you can apply these tips to meet with local and federal officials as well.

How to Set Up a Meeting with Your Elected Officials

1. Find out who your representative and senator are at https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials.
2. Contact the scheduler in your legislator’s district or Legislature office and ask for an appointment with the legislator or a legislative assistant.
3. Start calling to set up your appointment at least three weeks in advance.
4. Have dates and times available to give the scheduler (expect to be flexible!), as well as the issues you want to discuss and who will be present during the visit.
5. Confirm the visit by email or phone one or two days before the appointment.

Tips for Talking with Your Elected Officials

Build a relationship: Think about meeting with your legislator as an opportunity to begin building a relationship. This encounter will be one of many. Make sure you have a reason to follow up!

Be prepared: You can help ensure a positive meeting by taking time to prepare.
• Learn about the legislative priority issues and study the talking points. Reflect upon why those issues are important to you, and if you have any personal stories you could share during the meeting.

• Learn about your legislator’s positions by reviewing past votes, interviews and public statements on the issues. Try to anticipate what questions the legislator might ask and/or reasons the legislator may already support/oppose your requests. It helps to have responses prepared for opposing arguments and tying the issues into how they affect you, your family and your community.

• Always have an ask. Have questions prepared to ask the legislator, such as their position or perspective, or what you can do to help advance a bill you both support. Again, this is an opportunity to build trust and develop a relationship.

• Always prepare a reason to follow up. This helps you build a relationship.

• Print out your contact information to leave behind.

Stay organized: Use a legislative advocacy meeting task sheet to organize your visit, including who will be speaking on which issues if you go with a group. Make sure to allot time for the legislator to talk!

Respect their time: Legislators and their staff have packed schedules, so make sure to show up on time, stay on topic and keep the meeting concise. Often, they are scheduled for 15-minute time slots. Always start and end your meetings by thanking them for taking time out of their busy schedules to meet with you and again, make sure to give them time to talk.

Make clear requests for action: For each issue you address, include a clear, actionable request for the legislator. For example, “We’d like the senator to support ‘x’ bill.” If you are not able to meet the lawmaker directly, relay the “ask” to the staff member. The staff plays a critical role in shaping a legislator’s agenda and position on issues and will relay the message.
**Stay honest and positive:**

- Be positive, friendly and thankful to your legislator and the staff with whom you meet. It is common for a legislator to be late or interrupted, so remain calm and flexible.
- It is completely okay not to know an answer to a question - in fact, it gives you a good reason to follow up and keep building the relationship. Trust is paramount and can be lost if you provide false information when you do not know the answer to a question.
- Do not make up facts or stories. Say you do not know and will get the answer to them and then follow through on this commitment.
- You may not agree with the legislator’s stances on issues; remain respectful but convey your talking points.

**Take a picture:** If appropriate, take a photo with your legislator (ask first!) and tweet it out or send it to your colleagues.

**Send a thank you note:** After the meeting send a thank you note or email to the legislator expressing your appreciation for his or her time and any support, he or she showed you during the meeting. Send them additional information if you promised to do so. More tips for follow-up are described in the next subsection.

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**Follow Up After Your Meeting**

Your meeting with your legislator is the beginning of a relationship, so stay in touch! During your meeting, you should have already created a reason to follow up with them – and now it is time to follow through. Send fact sheets and statistics, put them in contact with relevant stakeholders or constituents, answer any questions they asked if you did not have the answer, and forward relevant endorsements.

It is also critical to stay engaged and track your legislator’s responses to the issues. If the legislator takes action, express your gratitude. If the legislator does not take action, ask for an explanation. Here are some suggestions to help:
Continue to engage with them in person and online: Attend constituent meet-and-greets and community forums (these are usually announced in constituent newsletters, on their social media platforms, or you can ask a staff member for the schedule or to be put on the email list). The public is also often welcome at events such as announcements and ribbon-cutting ceremonies where your officials will be. While not “in person,” you can also call in when your officials make radio appearances.

Follow through:
- If they agree with you: organize an event with them, ask them to appear or speak at an event you have organized around your issue, or encourage them to speak out on the issue.
- If they disagree with you: make your voice heard by asking them questions about your issue in public. If possible, record their response on your phone so you can share it on social media. You can also organize a protest or press conference outside one of their official events (or office) bringing attention to your issue.

Connect with your elected officials electronically: Most legislators have a social media presence, and this is another way to continue building those relationships and raising awareness. Find their government website and subscribe to their constituent newsletter or sign up for email alerts. Follow them on Facebook, Twitter, or other social media. You can write or respond on the legislator’s official page, or tag them in a separate post, and encourage others to speak out with you.

Sample Facebook Post: Act now: Call your legislators and tell them to support SB 377, legislation that will temporarily remove firearms from someone at risk of harming themselves or others, which has been sent back to the House with amendments to strengthen and improve the bill. @RepresentativeName.

Sample Tweet: I just met with @ [Your Representative’s Twitter Handle] to ask for their support on SB377 #doingmypart. Join me! @aasuidiology @JHU_CGVS #StopGun Violence

Consider posting a photo to Instagram of you advocating for gun violence prevention or adding a Snapchat Story, which enables your Snapchat followers to see what you’re doing to advocate and engage in your community. You can also “Go LIVE” on Instagram and Facebook, allowing your followers and friends to see the great work you are doing in real time through either social media platform.
How to Amplify Your Message

Legislators are not the only people you can engage! Tap into community organizations that are working on your issues.

Join Local/State Groups

Many local groups communicate via email, Facebook, Twitter and other online platforms, as well as in person. Look in media coverage for local groups holding gun violence prevention actions and connect with those groups.

Faith and community leaders often can be strong partners in advocating for gun violence prevention and in addressing the root causes of gun violence. Speak to faith and community leaders about joining or starting an effort to address gun violence. If a local group doesn’t exist, start your own by using the tools you used today to host meetings with members of your community.

Join National Groups

Joining national groups is a great way to learn more about issues that are important to you and enhance your awareness of the movements you are engaged in and related activities in communities across the country.
Reach Out to the Press

The press is a great way to spread your message to the community at large. Here are some tips for working with the media:

*Find local reporters:* Research local media (newspaper, radio, and television) to find reporters who are covering guns, suicide, politics, or government. Reach out to these reporters and introduce yourself as an advocate/activist on the issue of suicide prevention. Make sure to provide your contact information and let them know you will be available when they report on gun violence prevention issues. Don’t forget to follow them on social media and engage with them on your issue. Reputable local blogs may also be valuable contacts.

**Write a Letter to the Editor (LTE) or Opinion Article (Op-Ed)**

Writing a letter to the editor (LTE) or op-ed is an incredible advocacy tool. If your submission to the local newspaper is published, your advocacy reaches a public audience. You can do these two ways, by responding with an LTE or by submitting an op-ed.

An LTE is generally a reaction to an editorial, an op-ed, or news item. It is short (150-250 words) and begins with specifically referencing the article (title/date) that you are responding to. Be sure to be courteous, even in disagreement, and use facts to back up your argument. Always check specific guidelines with each publication and follow them closely.

An op-ed offers the clear and concise point of view of the author in 650-750 words. An op-ed should grab the reader’s attention with a strong point of view, offer clear and convincing points of evidence, and end with a strong closing statement. Be sure to respect the reader and avoid jargon or language that is not clear to the average person. Always check specific guidelines for each publication and follow them closely.