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TWENTY-THIRD SENATE DISTRICT



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**From: Senator Kathy Bernier**

**To: Senate Committee on Judiciary & Public Safety**

**Re: Testimony on Senate Bill 200**  
**Relating to:** grants related to preventing suicide by firearm and making an appropriation

**Date: May 6, 2021**

Thank you Chairman Wanggaard and committee members for allowing me to testify on Senate Bill 200 today. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with Rep. James on this important piece of legislation.

Senate Bill 200, recommended by the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention is meant to help mental health professionals and firearm retailers and ranges become more knowledgeable and helpful in situations that may escalate into a suicide involving firearms. This bill would also allow families experiencing a possible mental health emergency to voluntarily store their firearms in a safe place while they get through their time of crisis.

This bill builds on the successes of The Gun Shop Project in New Hampshire, which works to educate gun stores and firing ranges on suicide prevention and gives them tools and resources tailored to their customers. Twelve states, including Wisconsin, have already embraced the Project in some way. Gun ranges and stores in Wisconsin are already providing voluntary storage with no questions asked to families in need.

This legislation seeks to make the Gun Shop Project's initiatives available to gun retailers and range owners statewide. This bill directs the Department of Health Services to award grants to organizations that will share guidelines and train staff at firearm retailers/ranges on how to avoid selling firearms to persons who may be considering suicide, provide materials relating to suicide prevention, and provide voluntary firearm storage. The program is voluntary, and no gun store or range is required to participate.

This bill won't solve Wisconsin's firearm-related suicide problem, but it will help those in crisis by allowing them to store weapons worry-free when they are aware of a potential mental health problem as well as making sure that retailers have access to the information they need to recognize the signs of a firearm owner or buyer in crisis. Please vote to recommend Senate Bill 200 for passage. Thank you again for hearing this bill today.



STATE REPRESENTATIVE

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**JESSE JAMES**

Chairman Wanggaard and members of the Committee,

Thank you for hearing Senate Bill 200 today. Senate Bill 200 is a recommendation from the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention and will require the Department of Health Services to award grants to organizations or coalitions for the purpose of training staff at a firearm retailer or range on avoiding selling firearms to persons who may be considering suicide, providing suicide prevention materials for distribution, and providing voluntary, temporary firearm storage.

This bill's intent is to expand on efforts already being done, such as the Gun Shop Project that safely stores firearms for community members without questions asked. The Gun Shop Project helps firearm retailers and ranges become part of the solution when it comes to suicide prevention.

The grant money will allow them to purchase extra safes to store firearms for people who feel they need to give up their firearms for a period of time while they are going through crisis. It will also allow them to receive training to spot signs of suicide in their customers and be able to ask tough questions to their customers about how they are feeling. Every day, firearm retailers and ranges interact with their customers who buy and use firearms. It makes sense to give them more resources to help their customers who may be in a mental health crisis and be considering suicide.

At the end of the day, we are all human beings who need others to look out for us. We need to be able to have conversations that are sometimes uncomfortable to save someone else's life. I am proud to say that there are already businesses and various law enforcement agencies doing this in Wisconsin. The goal is to expand the network of groups who are part of the solution to suicide prevention. This bill will do just that.

I am proud to author this bill and start the conversation on how we can bring our communities together and look out for one another when times get tough.

## Chuck Lovelace testimony for Assembly Bill 193 & Senate Bill 200

Chairman Tittl and members of the Committee on Mental Health,

My name is Chuck Lovelace, owner of Essential Shooting Supplies and I am honored to provide testimony on Assembly Bill 193/Senate Bill 200. I want to first thank you for letting me come and speak today. As a Veteran, and a Gun Shop owner I was immediately drawn in when first approached by Safe Communities of Dane County to participate and be a voice for the suicide prevention program designed specifically for firearms retailers. The Gun Shop Project is a grass roots effort to educate the employees and owners of your small town gun shops on being able to recognize the signs of someone who may be in a time of crisis.

What drew me to the project is the way suicide has touched me and my family on many levels from family members, to fellow veterans, my son's classmate, and 2 customers of our shop. There are countless stories of how people are shocked and have/had no clue that someone was in a time of crisis and in need of a helping hand up. The Gun Shop Project really gives retailers a great set of tools to recognize and reach out to someone who just needs someone to recognize that they need help. After seeing the program in action I was so excited to be a voice for Suicide Prevention and urged other retailers in Dane County to participate.

After seeing the program and being a local ambassador I was sitting with Jean from Safe Communities and said we should look into offering a safe storage solution for people in a time of crisis who just need a time out from having their firearms readily accessible without having to get law enforcement or other authorities involved. The unfortunate truth is there are people who are uncomfortable getting these resources involved due to personal or perceived prejudices that they have.

Our program gives them a secure and confidential way to secure and reduce the immediate access to one of the popular means of suicide without judgment by providing storage in a temperature and humidity controlled fire resistant safe so there is no worry on their end about how the program works. We tag their gun with a tag that has a number or bar code and record it in a separate log we maintain to ensure compliance with the ATF rules and regulations. We ask when they come in to drop their firearms off that they come in with a trusted family member or friend. When we return their firearms post crisis we ask that they bring that person again for our protection as well as theirs.

There are no set time limits or restrictions other than if they bring ammunition in with their guns we don't return it at pick up. This is just an additional step we use for our own piece of mind and protection. While not all retailers may want to participate to the point we have by purchasing a fire safe that runs almost \$1,000 my wife and I felt strongly enough about this that we invested in the safe without a second thought. We truly feel that offering this service we are not only helping a person in a time of crisis, but also their friends, family, and the first responders who may be affected by a suicide by firearm. If we can help prevent one suicide then we have received a full return on our investment of time and money as each life is precious and needs to be cherished.



Chuck Lovelace testimony for Assembly Bill 193 & Senate Bill 200

Since the first offering of this bill I have been involved with another program through the Veterans Administration in Milwaukee under the Captain John D. Mason Veteran Peer Outreach Program. They have begun working with Gun Shops in Southeastern Wisconsin to start providing support and information on the Gun Shop Project, and the Safe Storage Initiative. With their work and the new bills being presented I feel we can make a large contribution to suicide prevention in Wisconsin.

Assembly Bill 193 & Senate Bill 200 will offer much needed funding through grants to educate retailers on the signs of someone in a potential time of crisis and how to de escalate or interact appropriately with them and give us another priceless tool for suicide prevention. I can't thank you all enough again for your time, support, and dedication to this critical bill. I especially want to thank the committee that spearheaded this by holding multiple hearings statewide on this difficult and trying subject. As a Father, Veteran, and Gun Shop owner I recognize the need to have as many resources available to not only help prevent suicide, but to build the courage and confidence in people to ask and reach out if they see someone who needs help.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony,

Chuck Lovelace

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A Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business



**Testimony for Senate Bill AB200 relating to:  
grants to prevent suicide by firearm and making an appropriation  
Bertrand D. Berger**

Good Morning. I am Bertrand D. Berger, Ph. D. I am a licensed clinical psychologist in the state of Wisconsin. I work at the VA and Medical College of Wisconsin. I am the chairperson for the Southeastern Wisconsin Task Force on Veteran Suicide Prevention and a member of the Governors Challenge to end Veteran Suicides. I am also the director of the Captain John D. Mason Veteran Outreach Program at the Medical College of Wisconsin which is dedicated to help Veterans connect to the VA and other healthcare systems and not die by suicide as did Captain Mason, who was a decorated combat Vietnam Veteran.

According to the CDC, suicide rates in the United States have increased by nearly one third over the past 20 years and suicide is the 10th leading cause of death. In 2017, the suicide rate for Veterans was 1.5 times the rate for non-Veteran adults. In the State of Wisconsin, suicide was ranked as the 10th leading cause of death in 2020 and similar to the rest of the country the suicide rate in Wisconsin increased by 40% from 2000 to 2017. About 1 in 5 suicides between 2012 to 2017 in Wisconsin was a Veteran, at a rate of 33.8 per 100,000. Accounting for age differences, the Veteran suicide rate in Wisconsin was significantly higher than the national Veteran suicide rate, the national suicide rate, and the Wisconsin suicide rate.

In review of data on violent death, the use of firearms is the most frequent mechanism of injury in suicide, higher even than in homicide. About 90% of firearm-related suicide attempts are fatal, as compared to approximately 5% of suicide attempts by all other mechanisms combined. Several studies have shown that rates of suicide are higher in states with higher levels of firearm ownership and these heightened rates are driven by firearm suicides. The per capita registered guns in Wisconsin is 11.9 per 1000, ranked 40th in the country. In the Veteran population, firearms were the method of suicide in 70.7% of male Veteran and 43.2% of female Veteran suicide deaths. In contrast, approximately half of suicides among non-Veteran adults in Wisconsin involved firearms. Additionally, it was found that 33.3% of Veteran firearm owners store at least one firearm loaded and unlocked. Restricting access to lethal means (e.g., ligature points, bridge access, poisons, and firearms) has been shown to be effective in preventing suicide; therefore, interventions to provide lethal means restriction among Veterans, especially regarding firearms is of the utmost importance.

Lethal means counseling which addresses firearm safety strategies within the home has been shown to be effective. However, storage of firearms outside the home is another promising strategy to impact access to firearms for individuals who are at risk of suicide. There are at least 16 firearm storage projects throughout the United States which provide various levels of education materials and firearm storage availability to the public. The Colorado Firearms Safety Coalition's firearm storage program is one of the most comprehensive in the nation. This program provides an interactive map of various firearm storage facilities throughout the state and provides links to educational materials and other similar programs. Even though there are no published outcomes on firearm storage projects, the Wisconsin public was informed about a Dane County firearm storage project, (i.e., the Gun Shop Project) through local television and newspaper media interest. I am the director of the Captain John D. Mason Veteran Outreach program which has adopted and is promoting this program by engaging gun shops and gun ranges throughout the state of Wisconsin on the SE Wisconsin Task Force on Veteran Suicide

Prevention's website. The website has developed a map modeled after the Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition, which shows the location of gun shops that have voluntarily agreed to be part of a program which provides suicide prevention materials and gun storage to customers. We have, to date, signed up 5 gun shops in the state of Wisconsin. The Task Force's website is a free service and is updated as we have new gun shops sign up.

According to the federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearm (ATF) department, there are 1800 Federal Firearms License (FFL) throughout the state of Wisconsin. Therefore, our program and any other programs like ours which could be supported by this bill have many opportunities to engage these Federally Licensed firearm gun shops and ranges. This bill will help facilitate this program to be expanded throughout the state of Wisconsin in every county. However, in our conversations with gun shops, they bring up the following barriers and concerns to participating:

1. We don't have storage space for this project in our store
2. We would like a separate safe or area in our store and don't have the funding to do this.
3. We don't have the time to do the background checks
4. We don't have the time to explain or work with people on this without financial help as we have regular customers to attend to

The appropriations of funds, as written in this bill to support agencies, which support these gun shops and gun ranges will significantly impact the ability of gun shops and ranges to participate in this program.

My personal goal, Captain Mason program, the Task Force's goal and the Governor's challenge goals all align, to provide this voluntary option to Veterans and non-Veterans as is noted in this bill; that anyone can learn about suicide prevention in multiple venues like gun shops, to learn about safe firearm behaviors, to know that suicide is preventable if people are willing to get the help; as well as having the option to store their firearm outside of their home.

This issue for safe gun storage at gun shops and ranges is not about taking guns away from people but by providing another option for people and their friends and family, who are in a crisis to have a way to make their home a safer environment during the crisis. After the crisis, they can still retrieve their firearm. There is research that shows that most suicides are impulsive and happen within minutes to and hour.

Take a second to imagine someone that uses a gun to attempt to kill themselves in a fit of frustration, anger or sadness. Most people do not usually survive from a bullet to the heart or head. I have spoken to some of those rare survivors that want to continue to live after their attempt. It is a devastating life for them due to the ongoing medical fall out they have to live with. So, this program could save the life of someone who is in a crisis and now does not have easy access to their gun. These people are more like to stop, altogether, from attempting suicide. This is how this program can save a life. Even one gun stored outside of the home may save a life and it is difficult to place a cost on that life. I encourage you to approve this bill for the good of the state of Wisconsin.

In 2009 in New Hampshire, in the course of less than a week, three people (with no connection to each other) legally purchased a firearm from the same store and killed themselves within hours of the purchase. The Medical Examiner's office brought this to the attention of their mental health liaison, and a small group of firearm retailers and mental health/public health practitioners met to explore whether there is a role for gun stores in preventing suicide. The group was later adopted by the NH Firearm Safety Coalition. The co-chair of the coalition has remained the same, it is the owner of the gun shop who transacted the fatal sales.

The project, called The Gun Shop Project developed materials with and for firearm retailers and range owners on ways they can help prevent suicide. Its objectives are to:

- Share guidelines on how to avoid selling or renting a firearm to a suicidal customer
- Encourage gun stores and firing ranges to display and distribute suicide prevention materials tailored to their customers

The Gun Shop Project is now nationwide, and the NH Safety Coalition freely shares all their materials. In Wisconsin, the project was launched in Dane County. I was the person who ran this project for Dane County and received positive support from the NH coalition as I adopted their materials.

The Gun Shop Project was widely accepted by gun shop owners (just one gave push back) but time has not permitted for me to revisit the shops in Dane County to see how many maintain their materials. I give full support for this project. It takes some time to set up, train and to produce the materials and secure partners but the relationship between the gun shops and the community partners is invaluable.

The Gun Shop Project is most valuable because of the partnership it brought from suicide prevention advocates and gun shops. The foundation of the project is that safety is part of the gun and suicide prevention cultures. No one is immune from the tragedy of suicide, so with the focus on saving lives, there is a shared community-strengthening commitment for both partners, which fosters understanding and knowledge. This isn't anti-gun; this is anti-suicide.



Realizing that impulsive firearms suicides (people who make a gun purchase and use it immediately in their death) are 10% of the firearm suicides, yet firearms make up about half of all suicides, it meant The Gun Shop Project would work even better if there was a role for gun shops for people who already own firearms. This realization was a nagging problem for me, but when I stopped at Essential Shooting Supplies in Mount Horeb, I found the gun shop owner, Chuck Lovelace, with the answer.

Please note that in your assembly bill, I see a promising mash up. You have drawn on the positive ideas of The Gun Shop Project (prevention materials available in the store for customers, training for gun shop personnel to prevent selling or renting to suicidal customers) but I see you also included Safe Storage. Safe Storage as a project, was the answer to my nagging problem of reaching out to firearm owners who may be in a temporary crisis.

The more Chuck and I talked, the more we realized that by letting gun shops be the site of safe, temporary, voluntary storage of firearms, we could help people who were in crisis, owned firearms, and needed a respectful and understanding local storage place. I explained to Chuck that only two evidence-based strategies were proven to prevent suicides: Have primary care physicians diagnose and treat depression and keep firearms out of the hands of people for the time they were in crisis. Firearm suicides are often the result of both long-term problems (substance misuse and untreated mental illness) and short-term problems (despairs like relationship problems, job and financial problems, isolation, loss, hopelessness and a feeling of burdensomeness). During the time of these struggles, safe temporary storage of firearms, if not with a friend or family, could be offered at gun shops. As Chuck points out, he's not there to be your therapist, and he really doesn't need to know your personal trials, but he would very much like to have the role of providing safe, temporary storage of firearms. Safe Storage is voluntary, there is a small fee charged by the gun shop to keep it dignified and give the gun owner some skin in the game. Chuck and I developed paperwork for the storage, and Chuck can tell you more about the inventory details.

I support voluntary safe storage. Safe Storage holds enormous potential to save lives by providing safe temporary storage of firearms when people are in a crisis. A suicidal crisis can be transient, help can come in many forms for treatment, intervention, and support, but keeping people alive during this time and working hard to get them well takes an entire community—gun shops, coalitions, families, legislator