



American
Public Health
Association

PROTECT, PREVENT, LIVE WELL

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Statement of the American Public Health Association
Submitted for the record to the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution,
Civil Rights, and Human Rights
Proposals for Reducing Gun Violence:
Protecting Our Communities While Respecting the Second Amendment
February 12, 2013

The American Public Health Association is the oldest and most diverse organization of public health professionals and advocates in the world dedicated to promoting and protecting the health of the public and our communities. We believe all Americans have the right to live in communities that are free from violence and are very pleased with President Obama's proposal to protect our communities from the deadly impact of gun violence. We welcome the opportunity to submit a statement for the record regarding congressional efforts to prevent gun violence. APHA believes that Congress must take a comprehensive public health approach to preventing gun violence in our nation. This includes additional unrestricted funding for more research and data collection, stronger and more protective common-sense gun laws, ensuring access to adequate mental health services and ensuring our state and local public health and mental health systems have adequate funding to put into place interventions to reduce gun violence and to provide mental health services to those in need. We stand ready to work with Congress and the administration to pass legislation to protect our nation's children and their families from the growing epidemic of gun violence.

Gun violence is one of the leading causes of preventable death in our country and we must take a comprehensive public health approach to addressing this growing crisis. For too long we as a nation have failed to take on this devastating problem in our communities and we can wait no longer. The heartbreaking and senseless tragedy that took the lives of the innocent children and adults in Newtown, Conn. is a tragic example of how gun violence is devastating our communities. This tragedy follows other horrific acts of gun violence that have plagued our nation for too long.

APHA believes that there are a number of areas where Congress must enact legislation to address gun violence. The following are some of the top priorities for APHA and we urge you to include these recommendations as you move forward in developing legislation to prevent gun violence in the United States.

Increase funding for data collection and research

We must expand the collection of data and research related to gun violence and other violent deaths in order to better understand the causes and develop appropriate interventions. We oppose any restrictions on federal funding for research into gun violence and we strongly support

President Obama's call for increased funding for research into the causes of gun violence at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

We support an increase of \$10 million in Fiscal Year 2014 for the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), a state-based violent death prevention tool administered by CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. This important public health surveillance system is the underpinning of a multi-faceted, multi-agency approach. NVDRS requires cross-agency collaboration at the state level, and the surveillance data collected would prove invaluable for the design of targeted gun violence prevention strategies. But to do that, it must expand from its current 18 states and move toward nationwide implementation. CDC has developed a strategic plan for this expansion and is committed to full implementation of the program. Currently funded at \$3.5 million, an increase of \$10 million in FY14 would move the country half-way towards national implementation and represent a long-term, lasting contribution to the nation in state-based gun violence prevention efforts. We urge a multi-year approach following FY14 to secure the \$25 million needed for nationwide expansion of NVDRS to all 50 states and U.S. territories.

Remove deadly weapons from our communities

APHA supports requiring and strengthening criminal background checks for all firearms purchases, including all firearms sold by all sellers at gun shows. The so-called "gun show loophole," currently exempts unlicensed private sellers of firearms from conducting criminal background checks on buyers at gun shows. This significant gap in federal law provides access to weapons for felons, the mentally ill and others prohibited from owning firearms.

We support Senator Dianne Feinstein's Assault Weapons Ban of 2013 to reinstate the federal ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, which expired in 2004. These firearms are not suitable for hunting, collecting or self-defense, but are meant for military combat and have no place on our streets or in our homes. APHA has long supported strengthening and reinstating the federal ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines that can hold more than ten rounds. We have witnessed too many times the deadly impact of these weapons and high-capacity magazines and we urge Congress to pass Senator Feinstein's legislation.

Strengthen our nation's mental health system

In addition to common-sense gun control measures, we urge you to work with the administration to ensure adequate funding for critical mental health services. Like most public health funding at the state and local level, funding for mental health services has been on the decline in recent years. At the same time, funding for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has been proposed for cuts in the president's budget and in various spending bills in the House of Representatives. We urge you to ensure that state, local and community-based behavioral health systems have the resources they need to provide much-needed care. While the expansion of Medicaid coverage will provide mental health benefits to millions of currently uninsured Americans, gaps will likely still exist since several states have signaled they do not plan to expand this coverage.

We also urge the Department of Health and Human Services to ensure that the Affordable Care Act provides comprehensive coverage for mental health and substance use disorder services as part of the Essential Health Benefits. The design of EHB will have a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of over 70 million Americans. EHB design will also have a tremendous impact across our health system and is a central component of the ACA. We believe that EHB is a critically important opportunity to address the health needs of the 25 million Americans with untreated mental illness and/or substance use disorders, prevent these diseases in millions more, and provide necessary services to those seeking care for or in recovery from MH/SUD to improve their health and wellness and allow them to reach their full potential.

Support resources for school and community-based prevention

APHA supports comprehensive measures in community and school-based prevention, early intervention strategies and preparedness initiatives to prevent gun violence and prepare our communities and schools in the event of an emergency. We must make our schools safer, where teachers, faculty and students can dedicate their efforts to teaching and learning without the concern of violence. To improve the physical safety of students and others, we believe it is essential that schools collaborate with local community groups to develop and implement a comprehensive and effective emergency management plan. Teachers, other personnel and students should all be appropriately trained and prepared to implement the safety plan.

Beyond securing the physical safety of students, faculty and other personnel, school policies must promote a positive school climate to support the emotional and learning needs of all students to maintain a safe environment. We support school policies and programs that reduce bullying and at-risk behavior, and increase access to mental health supports, and urge you to ensure that schools have adequate funding to expand mental health services and resources. Increasing awareness, prevention, early detection and treatment are critical to ensuring appropriate care and can contribute to strengthening our nation's mental health system. To achieve this, we support providing on-site mental health services, through centers such as school-based health centers, in schools K-12, a common-sense approach to ensure that children and youth are able to access appropriate treatment and services. In addition to providing individualized services, SBHCs support all students' mental health by creating school-wide programs that address bullying, violence, anger, depression and other social and emotional issues that impede academic achievement.

We also urge you to ensure that schools and communities have the funding necessary to provide proper training for parents, teachers and other community leaders to identify mental health conditions early-on. These training programs will allow for an improved understanding of mental health warning signs, minimized stigma and a more robust referral system for students to access critical mental health resources.

Conclusion

Gun violence continues to take a tremendous toll on our communities and there is no excuse for inaction. APHA urges the Senate Judiciary Committee and both the House and the Senate to move forward with comprehensive legislation to address the public health crisis of gun violence in our nation.