Senator Martin Looney
Senate Majority Leader

On

Proposed Senate Bill 695: An Act Establishing a Gun Offender Registry

Joint Committee on Public Safety

February 10, 2011

Senator Hartley, Representative Dargan and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Proposed Senate Bill 695, ***AN ACT ESTABLISHING A GUN OFFENDER REGISTRY.*** This proposal was suggested to me by New Haven Chief of Police Frank Limon. Chief Limon told me he felt that it would be the single most effective new tool we could provide to law enforcement, to help prevent and combat the plague of gun violence occurring on city streets throughout our state.

I believe it's clear that we have a very significant crisis of gun violence in our cities. In my city of New Haven, for example, there were 22 homicides with a firearm in 2010, almost double the amount from 2009. There were also 116 non-fatal shootings in 2010, and 135 in 2009. Keep in mind; this is in a city of only 123,000 residents. The total of 138 deadly and non-deadly shootings in New Haven last year was around 1 per 900 New Haven residents.

I believe it is useful in gauging the magnitude of our problem to compare New Haven's shooting rate to Boston, a city more than 5 times as large (with a population of approximately 620,000). In Boston, in 2010 there were 58 homicides with a firearm and 205 non-fatal shootings – a total of 263 shootings – less than twice as many as New Haven, in a city more than 5 times as large. Boston's total rate of shootings per capita was approximately 1 deadly or non-deadly shooting per 2350 people.

Viewed this way, last year New Haven had more than two and a half times as many shootings per capita than Boston.

I believe this crisis demands that we give very serious attention to the Connecticut law enforcement representatives that are asking for a gun offender registry. They believe such a registry would help them greatly in their never ending battle against gun violence. In addition to New Haven Chief Limon, the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association is strongly supporting this proposal as well.

Currently, there appear to be 5 existing gun offender registries operative in cities throughout the country. These are in New York City, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Utica, NY and Suffolk County, NY.

While based on the same principles as the very successful Megan's Law, most of these gun offender registries differ from sex offender registries in a few critically important respects. First, while sex offenders generally must register either for a minimum of 10 years or for life, all of the current gun offender registration requirements are for relatively short, limited time periods. For example, the New York City and Suffolk County registration periods are four years from the later of release from imprisonment or conviction, whereas Baltimore requires three years of registration.

Also, while Megan's Law registries are usually contained on publicly accessible websites, the gun offender registries are NOT public websites. Instead, they are databases available only to law enforcement, strictly to assist them in preventing and investigating crime.

Finally, whereas Megan's Laws generally do not require updates from offenders unless they change addresses, the gun offender registry laws generally require registrants to check in with their local police departments not only when they move, but also once every 6 months, or once a year, throughout the limited length of their registration period.

A good description of the public policy rationale for Gun Offender Registry Acts ("GORAs") appeared on the website of the organization "Mayors Against Illegal Guns", who are leading advocates for this approach:

> A key component of cities' strategies against gun crime is targeted enforcement against those who carry illegal guns, because they are more likely to be rearrested for more violent crimes. Both New York City and Baltimore developed a GORA in response to data showing high recidivism rates among gun offenders. In New York City, for example, those convicted of felony gun possession in 2000 were four times more likely to be arrested for homicide compared to other felons – 4% compared to 1%. Similarly, recent Baltimore statistics show that 42% of defendants charged with felony gun crimes have prior gun arrests. GORAs help combat gun violence by requiring pro-active monitoring of gun offenders, which discourages them from reoffending while ensuring prompt apprehension if they do engage in criminal activity.

As Utica Police Chief Daniel LaBella put it, "The fact that the individual knows he's registered and he's being tracked serves as a specific deterrent to re-offending. That, in itself, gives us a huge advantage."

With regard to recidivism rates for Connecticut gun offenders, I believe it is highly significant that a 2010 study by the Office of Policy and Management clearly demonstrated that those convicted of gun crimes were more likely to be rearrested within

3 years of their release from prison than individuals who had been imprisoned for non-gun-related offenses.

While the 5 existing gun offender registries are relatively new, there does appear to be some evidence that they are proving to be successful. For example, in 2009, the Mayor of Baltimore reported that, in that city's registry's first year, only 3 of the more than 200 registrants who were out of jail had been rearrested for handgun violations, and only a few others had been arrested for various misdemeanors that had been dismissed.

Therefore, I respectfully suggest that this committee consider a bill with at least the following elements: 1) requiring individuals who are convicted of specified gun crimes to register with the Commissioner of Public Safety either following their conviction or release from incarceration, with personal information including their photograph and address; 2) requiring the Commissioner to maintain a database with that information for a period of 4 years for each offender, that is readily accessible to local law enforcement throughout the state but is not publicly displayed; 3) requiring registrants to report to the Commissioner whenever they change their address; 4) requiring registrants to check in with their local law enforcement at least once a year during their period of registration, and 5) establishing a criminal penalty for failure to register.

Thank you for your consideration.