



John DeStefano, Jr.
Mayor

CITY OF NEW HAVEN
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
165 Church Street, New Haven, CT 06510
Phone (203)-946-8200, Fax (203)-946-7683



Testimony of the City of New Haven
Before the Public Safety Committee

Regarding

SB 1076 AN ACT CONCERNING THE REDUCTION OF GUN VIOLENCE

Submitted by

John DeStefano, Jr.

March 14, 2013

Senator Hartley, Representative Dargan, members of the the Public Safety Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of SB 1076 and other bills that would help to reduce the prevalence of gun violence in our communities.

In offering my testimony I recognize that it was the events that took place three months ago today at Sandy Hook Elementary School that are motivating much of this legislation. It was a tragedy and all of the victims – the children, the teachers, the families, Newtown and all of Connecticut deserve better. Some argue that these bills are too soon, that we don't know enough about the events at Sandy Hook to make informed changes – however I would argue that it is too late.

It is not my intent to compare tragedies, no one is worse than the other – but you see that gun homicides, shootings, child victims and all the pain and suffering that they entail are nothing new in America or here in Connecticut. The people of Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven have known about and lived through gun violence day after day, month after month and year after year. Since January 1, 2011 there have been 53 homicides in New Haven – virtually all by guns. Over the same period there have been over 200 victims of gun shot wounds in our City – including children. What I can't quantify for you are the victims the thousands of our families, children, parents and grandparents who have to live, work, go to school in the midst of this ever single day.

There are, fundamentally, three kinds of gun violence tearing at our state. None of them is more important than the other – all do incalculable harm. We must recognize the ways they are distinct and different and craft measures that will work to stop all forms of gun violence – so that we are not too late to stop the next tragedy.

The first, and the one that produces by far the largest number of fatalities is concentrated in poor minority neighborhoods and kills, overwhelmingly, young black men. It is driven by gangs, drug crews and is estimated to account for three quarters of all homicides. The guns are rarely semi-automatic assault rifles, they are typically hand guns that have been acquired by straw purchasers, in trade for drugs from their legal owners who then report them stolen or from theft. I cannot emphasize enough how damaging this constant drumbeat of violence is to our community. How it brings everything and everybody down – our families, our economy, our public safety personnel, our schools and hospitals all suffer from the constant violence. To address these problems we need to close loopholes on sales, strengthen background checks and registration

requirements and licensing standards, enhance the ability to trace guns and enact stricter penalties for straw purchases and failure to report a stolen firearm.

The second gun violence problem is that of the day to day armed robbery, street disputes, and domestic violence. This is concentrated among active criminals – in other words people we know. These are not ordinary people who own guns shooting and killing store clerks and spouses. These are individuals with prior interaction with police often individuals with prior convictions. Here we must know who is in our community. A gun offender or weapons offender registry will help to pro-actively engage individuals who are not in the custody of probation or parole. Individuals who receive services are significantly less likely to reoffend.

And finally there is Newtown, Aurora, Tucson and the far too many communities that have experienced spree shootings. While the least common, these events get our attention due to the extent of the carnage. Here we must proactively address mental health issues, address the problem of access to exotic weaponry and the role of large capacity magazines that make it easy to change and rearm and ensure that legitimate gun owners store their weapons safely.

If we are to deal with all forms of gun violence we need to fully understand that keeping an assault rifle away from the next spree shooter will do nothing to keep drug dealers from killing each other and by mistake the little girl down the street with a 22 caliber handgun. And we know that controlling the drug dealers will do nothing to prevent the next spree shooting.

I want to draw your attention to several of these recommendations:

Stricter Licensing Standards: New York City has consistently been ranked one of the safest cities by the FBI and it is seen as no coincidence that they also have some of the strictest gun laws and exceptionally strict licensing standards. Licensing agents – police chiefs or chief elected officials – have little discretion as to who issue licenses to, and denials are reportedly frequently overturned by the Board of Firearm Permit Examiners (BFPE) License standards must be clarified and held to a stricter standard. Gun ownership is a right – but rights come responsibilities. In addition to the expanded disqualifications for a permit included in the bill, I urge the committee to also define the condition of “suitability” and enable local law enforcement to request additional documentation including mental health records as a condition of permit.

Enhanced Purchase Requirements: Loopholes should not exist. I whole heartily support the provisions in the bill that require every gun purchase to include a background check and extending the licensing standards to long guns. I also applaud the inclusions of the permit requirement for the purchase of ammunition, because nobody prohibited from owning a gun should have the ability to purchase ammunition.

Mandatory Registration: Similar to a proposal by the major cities chief’s association, mandatory registration would enable the enforcement of existing laws regarding transfers and reporting of stolen weapons. While new handguns have had to be registered for about 20 years, older guns and long guns have previously been exempt from this requirement. This is necessary to more adequately address the issues of illegal gun transfers and to keep guns out of the hands of criminals.

Gun Offender Registry: I am the most pleased to see the offender registry included in this bill. This is a proposal that we have pushed for the last two years. As most acts of violence are committed by an individual that has previous interactions with the court system, it is important to have robust reentry programs. Modeled after similar programs in New York City, Baltimore and Washington, DC – a gun offender registry enables law enforcement access to current address information of individuals previously convicted of a gun offense so that they can be monitored and connected to reentry services. It is estimated that as many as one in seven individuals convicted of a gun crime are released end of sentence into the community. This means that they are without the benefit of a supervised transition through probation or parole and there is no ability for the police or re-entry programs to pro-actively engage them. Individuals that receive services are drastically less likely to recidivate. By ensuring that these services are made available to more individuals – we can work to reduce the occurrences of these subsequent offenses.

There is no magic potion – no one solution. By specifically crafting a solution to any single offense you ignore the many types of violence that plague our communities. I commend the committee for crafting a bill that recognizes this – these proposals will make a difference in helping to reduce the prevalence of gun violence in all of our communities.