

March 11, 2019

Dear Members of the House and Judiciary,

My name is Michele Stawasz and I live in New Milford, CT. I am a mother and a scientist. I'm writing this testimony in support of HB-7218: AN ACT CONCERNING THE SAFE STORAGE OF FIREARMS IN THE HOME. This bill is important and necessary for 3 reasons: (1) it requires that ALL firearms, whether loaded or unloaded, be securely stored on any premises where a minor is likely to gain access, (2) it raises the age of minor from 16 to 18 years old, and (3) the secure storage requirement includes situations where a non-minor who poses a risk of personal injury to him/herself resides on the premises where the firearm is stored.

Many people providing testimony will cite statistics about the accidental deaths of minors or of suicides enabled by unsecured firearms. These statistics are important and should be considered with utmost gravity. In lieu of statistics, however, in this testimony I will relate a few personal experiences. As a teenager growing up in Western Massachusetts in the early 1990s, I was impacted by two separate firearm-related deaths that illustrate the need for this kind of legislation.

In my hometown of West Springfield in 1990, a boy just a few days shy of his 16th birthday was killed by the accidental discharge of his father's firearm in the hands of his friend. The 2 boys had accessed the firearm, which was unsecured, and were playing with it, unbeknownst to the parents. At the time of this tragic accident, I was the same age as the boy, and was struck by the senseless loss of a young life and the hopes and dreams that he must have had that would never be realized. As an adult and a parent, I think now about the immense grief that his family must have suffered and the overwhelming regret that his parents must have felt for not having secured the weapon in a way that would have prevented the boys from accessing it. Passage of HB-7218 would compel firearm owners in Connecticut who have children under the age of 18 in the household to do just that.

In 1993, a friend of mine from high school committed suicide using a firearm in his family's household. He was 18 years old and lived with his parents and younger brother. He had been attending community college in the year following our graduation, but was severely depressed. I have thought about him with grief in my heart countless times in the 26 years since I attended his funeral. I am not making a judgement as to whether there had been signs that my friend posed a risk of injury to himself, but in Connecticut today and in the future there are and will surely be people 18 years of age and older who do show signs of being a threat to themselves (or others) and who live in households where there are firearms. Passage of HB-7218 would compel firearm owners to consider the mental state of those non-minors who live on premises where firearms are stored, and to take action to prevent those individuals who pose a risk of injury to themselves or others from unauthorized access of the firearms.

In both of the tragedies related above, it was not clear whether the firearms had been stored loaded or unloaded. In the eyes of the law, this distinction should not be a factor. An unloaded and accessible firearm can be loaded, and thus is potentially just as dangerous as a firearm that was stored loaded. Importantly, HB-7218 does not distinguish between loaded and unloaded firearms, but requires the secure storage of all firearms.

The ownership of firearms requires great responsibility. It is not too much to ask firearm owners to take reasonable precautions to prevent their firearms from getting into the hands of those who could be accidentally harmed by them or who could do harm with them. Please help to protect minors and people with mental health issues who live in households with firearms from the potentially tragic consequences of unauthorized access to those firearms. I urge you to pass this important legislation.

In addition to HB-7218, I would like to document my support for the following:

HB-219, AN ACT CONCERNING GHOST GUNS

SB-60, AN ACT CONCERNING THE PRESENTATION OF A CARRY PERMIT

Thank you.

Michele Stawasz, Ph.D.