

Testimony in Support of HB 2510
House Committee on Health Care
Date: 3/11/21

Dear Chair Prusak, Vice Chairs Hayden and Salinas, and members of the committee,

My name is Paul Mitchell, and I am a Pediatric Resident Physician at Doernbecher Children's Hospital. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted mental health for all Americans, but perhaps none more than teenagers. Our pediatric inpatient units over the last 12 challenging months have been, at times, composed almost entirely of adolescents who have attempted suicide or endorsed a desire to do so. Teens are suffering with the unprecedented stress of our current time. My experience in caring for these patients has shown me that if we can bridge them through the acute stress and suicidal crisis, we can save their lives. As will be detailed below, when suicide is attempted with a firearm, it is VASTLY more successful than by other means. Easy accessibility of firearms in that temporary and impulsive moment of crisis can be the difference between another teen suicide and a second chance at life. By mandating safe storage of firearms, we can help prevent teenagers who are suffering from innumerable stressors from taking their own life. With the added stressors of COVID-19, it is essential now more than ever that we act to protect our children. For this reason and others detailed below, I write to you in strong support of HB 2510.

Approximately 40% of U.S. households with children also have firearms. One in five U.S. households with children contains an unsecured, loaded gun, providing easy access and increasing the risk of youth suicide, unintentional shootings and gun violence.¹ In gun owning households, 36% of children under age 10 reported that they had handled the firearms, many without their parents' knowledge.²

In 2018 alone, 40 Oregon children and adolescents died by firearm: 28 suicides, 8 homicides, two accidental deaths and two undetermined manners of death.^{3,4} Suicide is the leading cause of death among Oregonians 10 to 24 years old, with guns being the most common mechanism.^{5,6} In fact, Oregon has the fastest-growing rate of pediatric suicide by firearm in the country.^{7,8}

While data from 2019 suggests a modest decrease in teen suicide, Oregon's teen firearm suicide rate over the last 20 years remains almost 60% higher than the national average. Approximately 90% of suicide attempts using a firearm result in death, compared with fewer than 5% of attempts with other means. Suicidal thoughts are incredibly impulsive. Over 50% of survivors of a suicide attempt report less than 10 minutes between their first thought, and their act. If a child or teen cannot get to a firearm, they are much less likely to die.

To address this crisis, many organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, recommend the enactment of safe storage laws, such as HB 2510.^{9,10,11} Numerous studies indicate that these laws increase safe storage practices and decrease both pediatric suicide rates and accidental firearm deaths.^{12,13,14,15,16} Currently, 29 states and the District of Columbia have child access prevention (CAP) laws in place.¹⁷ Oregon, however, does not have any statutes governing firearm storage.^{18,19} Safe storage of household guns, meaning the simple act of preventing unintentional access by keeping them in a locked gun vault or safe, decreases the risk of self-inflicted and unintentional firearm injuries among children and teens — up to 85 percent depending on the type of storage practice.

Simply put, safe gun storage laws are effective in preventing both unintentional injuries and suicide. They save kids lives.

I urge you to vote yes on HB 2510. Thank you for your consideration. I am willing to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully,

Paul Mitchell, MD

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