



# Oregon Pediatric Society

A Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Incorporated in Oregon

DATE: April 22, 2021

TO: The Honorable Barbara Smith Warner, Chair  
and Members of the House Committee on Health Care

FROM: William J. Byrne, M.D.  
Retired Professor of Pediatrics at OHSU  
Oregon Pediatric Society Member

SUBJECT: Support for SB 554-A, Safe Gun Storage

The Oregon Pediatric Society (OPS) is the state chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Our membership is committed to improving and protecting the health and well-being of all children and adolescents in Oregon. On behalf of the OPS membership, I urge your committee to support SB 554A, which by incorporating HB 2510, codifies for gun owners their responsibilities for the storage, supervision of minors using firearms and reporting the loss or theft of their firearms.

There are over 393 million firearms in the United States, about 120.5 for every 100 persons, giving us the dubious distinction of ranking number one in the world with double the number of our nearest “competitor,” the Falkland Islands, at 62.1. Canada averages 34.7/100 persons and Mexico 12.9/100. For European countries the number is between 4.6/100 (England) and 32.4/100 (Finland). In Oregon guns are present in about 27 percent of households, and that number is increasing—dramatically during the pandemic.

During 2020 there was a 43% increase in gun sales in Oregon and according to retailers reports, 40% of gun purchases were by first-time buyers. Couple this increase with the fact that about 50,000 Oregon children and teens live in homes with LOADED guns. And, according to the Oregon Health Authority, 25,000 of these are in homes where the loaded weapons are neither secured in locked containers or with trigger locks. Salem, we have a problem.

Improper gun storage poses two main risks for children and adolescents: accidental shootings and suicide. Annually in the US, accidental shootings kill 1,300 children and many more are seriously injured. Forty percent of all unintentional shooting deaths occur among youth ages 11 to 14 in a home where friends find and play with an unsecured loaded weapon. Most of the victims are boys. Parents mistakenly believe they can hide a loaded gun or successfully teach a child or teen not to play with firearms. Studies have shown that 75% of children, particularly teenagers, know



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where the guns are “hidden.” Further, children under 12 who find a gun will play with and try to fire it. A three-year-old can pull a trigger.

Early in my career, I took care of a four-year-old child who accidentally shot himself while playing with a gun he found in his mother’s purse. It was a serious head wound but he survived. After almost eight weeks in the hospital, including four in the ICU, he went home but with serious neurologic sequelae. The parents divorced, and almost a year later I learned that his mother, overwhelmed with guilt and burdened by his care, died of suicide. It has been forty years, but certain patients and family stories you never forget.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death in teenagers and the numbers have been steadily increasing. In 2020 the teenage suicide rate in Oregon was 16/100,000 teenagers, 20 percent above the national average. Most teenage attempts at suicide are on impulse. Easy or quick access to a loaded unsecured firearm increases suicide death between four and ten times. Lack of immediate access buys time, allows the crisis to pass, and saves lives. With help, more than 90 percent of teenagers do not attempt suicide again.

SB 554A does not conflict with Second Amendment rights or restrict personal freedoms. Most guns owners are responsible, but with the prevalence of gun ownership and the increasing number of first-time gun owners, it can no longer be assumed that all will properly secure their weapons. Because of the lethal potential of firearms, the public has the right, if not the duty, to clarify any ambiguities as to what constitutes responsible gun ownership. A poll of Oregonians found that two-thirds, including 58% who were gun owners, support safe guns storage laws.

SB 554A codifies the public’s expectations when it comes to the storage of guns, the supervision of minors using guns, or the reporting of stolen guns. It sets reasonable standards for responsible gun ownership. Accident and suicide prevention make this bill an important public health measure.

Please join me and the Oregon Pediatric Society in supporting SB 554A. Let’s make Oregon a safer place for children and teenagers, and a safer place for all of us to live.

Thank you,

*William J. Byrne*

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