

September 9, 2019

To the Speakers Task force on Suicide Prevention:

The following organizations are respectfully asking you to recommend and work to put in place Extreme Risk Protection Orders in Wisconsin. Studies show that ERPO laws prevent suicide among those most at risk.

As you are aware, suicide is a complex public health crisis that requires action on many fronts. While depression, mental illness, substance abuse and addictions play significant roles in suicide, it is important to expand our focus beyond the "why" and "who" aspects of suicide and critically examine the "how." An honest and open examination of the means people use when attempting to end their own life is crucial because the method of harm can determine the difference between life and death. Suicide attempts using a firearm are fatal in 90% of those attempts, whereas the most common alternative methods have a 5% fatality rate.ⁱ

Preventing someone who is experiencing a moment of crisis from accessing a firearm is crucial to keeping them alive in that moment and crucially, long-term. Studies show that 90% of the people who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide in the future.ⁱⁱ Treatment works; people do get better. Suicidal thoughts are often transient, fleeting moments, and thus keeping people safe during a crisis can save their life.

Given these facts, firearms must be part of any comprehensive suicide prevention conversation and must not be pushed aside, especially in Wisconsin, where 72% of all firearm deaths are suicidesⁱⁱⁱ and nearly half of all suicides in Wisconsin involve a firearm.^{iv} We fully understand that firearm conversations can be politically charged and difficult, but in order to reduce the risk of death for those who are suicidal, it is critical to take practical steps to protect those individuals from harm.

Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPO) provide a civil process for family, close friends or law enforcement to petition the court, under due process, to have firearms temporarily removed from a person who is at risk for harm to self or others.^v ERPO has become law in 17 states, and Washington D.C.. In states where ERPO has been used the longest, preventing suicide or self-harm has frequently been cited as the basis for the Order. A recent study estimates that separate ERPO laws in Indiana and Connecticut may have prevented 383 firearm suicides over a ten year period, and 128 firearm suicides over an eight year period, respectively.^{vi}

Unlike an involuntary mental commitment or what is called a Chapter 51 in Wisconsin, ERPO does not dictate where treatment must be, nor does it burden the mental health system by demanding hospitalization for people who lack the need for such intensive and restrictive care.

ERPO simply temporarily removes firearms, the most lethal means of suicide, in an attempt to keep people safe in times of crisis, while still protecting responsible gun ownership.

Because ERPO has not been established in Wisconsin, the informal method of safely storing firearms away from suicidal individuals is a current best practice. By restricting access to deadly weapons, this offers a temporary way for family and friends who see dangerous warning signs to help them until they receive treatment. Some local Dane County gun shops allow people to temporarily store and safety check a firearm for someone in a crisis, while some hospitals and police departments give away free gun locks.

The problem with safe storage by itself is that there is no formal intervention process for those who see a loved one, who has easy access to firearms, spiraling into a crisis. Because safe storage exists outside of any legal realm, it is often incumbent upon the person having suicidal thoughts to ask a trusted friend, family or hunting partner to safely store their firearms. This can lead to devastating consequences when the person struggling is unwilling or unable to temporarily give up their firearms. Family and friends need tools backed by the law for intervening when they see that a person poses a threat to themselves.

ERPO is a proven and successful instrument for petitioning a judge to temporarily remove firearms from people who are suicidal. ERPO is not a cure or treatment for a mental health disorder any more than a designated driver taking home an intoxicated person is an alcohol treatment plan. Rather, ERPO in combination with safe storage practices serve as a stop-gap measure to provide safety until a plan can be made and resources lined up. ERPO and safe storage are not anti-gun; they are anti-suicide.

Thank you for your consideration and for your efforts to identify suicide prevention policies in Wisconsin. We urge you to take proactive steps during this legislative session to ensure that Wisconsin can move forward with a concrete suicide reduction plan.

Sincerely,

Mental Health America-WI

NAMI-Wisconsin

National Association of Social Workers-WI Chapter

WAVE Educational Fund

Children's Hospital of Wisconsin

American Family Children's Hospital

Brady: United to End Gun Violence

Chief Michael C. Koval - Madison Police Department

Dane County Sheriff David Mahoney

Wisconsin Public Health Association

Doctors for America

End Domestic Abuse WI

Forward Latino

Kids Forward

Progressive Moms of Wisconsin

Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Madison

WI Council of Churches

ⁱ Miller, Matthew; Azrael, Deborah; Hemenway, David. "The epidemiology of case fatality rates for suicide in the northeast." <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15159703>

ⁱⁱ Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "Attempters' Longterm Survival." <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/survival/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tuan WJ. "Wisconsin Firearm Mortality, 2000-2014." <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29323805>

^{iv} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Fatal Injury Reports, National, Regional and State, 1981 – 2017" <https://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/mortrate.html>

^v Gifford Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. "Extreme Risk Protection Orders" <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/who-can-have-a-gun/extreme-risk-protection-orders/>

^{vi} Kivisto, Aaron J.; Phalen, Peter Lee. "Effects of Risk-Based Firearm Seizure Laws in Connecticut and Indiana on Suicide Rates, 1981-2015." <https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ps.201700250>