

## GUEST OPINION

# The link between suicide and firearms

By Deb Andraca

Suicide is hard to talk about, but doing so just might save a life. September is suicide prevention month and there has never been a better, or more important, time to check in on your loved ones' mental health. Death by suicide in Wisconsin is at an all-time high, rising 41% from 2004 to 2022, and 60% of those deaths were by firearm. The most at-risk groups are white middle-aged men and white men 75 and older who tend to own firearms at higher rates.

Research shows if someone attempts suicide and survives, only about 1 in 10 of those people will go on to die by suicide — but with a gun the first attempt is usually fatal. What if we could temporarily remove a firearm from this deadly equation and give someone a 90% chance of survival? What if we could encourage policies that help put time and space between a person in crisis and his or her firearm? There are several bipartisan bills in the Legislature that would do just that — if the Legislature takes action.

Secure storage of firearms can decrease gun-related injuries and deaths while also helping to prevent guns from being stolen, diverted into illegal markets or used in other crimes. The Johns Hopkins School of Public Health reports that over 50% of gun owners in the United States, including 55% of gun owners with children living with them, do not adhere to safe firearm storage practices. Findings published by the Society for Research in Child Development show suicide rates among children and adolescents who live in



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A key part of preventing gun suicide is ensuring there is time and space between the person and a firearm. While responsible in-home storage is the first line of defense, it may not be enough when the person in crisis is the gun owner. Having an out-of-home location to safely store a firearm during a time of crisis can be a life-saving option. Assembly Bill 173 awards grants to train staff at firearm retailers and ranges to recognize a person in crisis. Funds are available to provide materials on suicide prevention and voluntary, temporary firearm storage to the registered owner of the gun.

But what if someone is unwilling to safely store a firearm outside the home and is in imminent danger of self-harm or harming others? Assembly Bill 352 creates an extreme risk protection order (ERPO) in Wisconsin that mirrors temporary restraining order and injunction processes such as the existing domestic abuse injunction. With an ERPO, if a person is likely to injure themselves or another person, a family member or law enforcement officer may present evidence and petition a judge to temporarily prevent the person from possessing a firearm, pending a hearing held within 14 days. At least 19 states

homes with guns are four times higher than among those in homes without guns. Assembly Bill 352 would provide a tax exemption to incentivize the use of items such as gun safes, trigger locks and gun barrel locks.

and the District of Columbia have ERPO laws, including Indiana, Florida, and most recently Minnesota and Michigan.

According to the Marquette Poll released on May 24, 85% of respondents favor laws that allow police to remove guns from people who have been found by a court to be a danger to themselves or others, while 15% are opposed. These protection orders are strongly favored both by those in households with guns (83%) and those without guns (88%).

For years, despite overwhelming bipartisan public support, the Republican-led legislature has refused to pass lifesaving measures like these in Wisconsin. With more guns in more places than ever before, we urgently need lawmakers to step up and require firearms to be handled safely and responsibly. We must enact measures to help keep guns away from those at risk, especially young people, to give them another chance. Talking about suicide is difficult, but not talking about it is worse. Please contact your legislators and urge them to pass these bipartisan bills. The life you save could be someone you know.

If you are feeling alone and having thoughts of suicide — whether or not you are in crisis — or know someone who is, don't remain silent. Talk to someone you can trust by calling or texting the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

*(State Rep. Deb Andraca, D-Whitefish Bay, represents Assembly District 23, which includes the northern suburbs of Milwaukee as well as Mequon and Thiensville.)*