



JESSE JAMES

State Representative • 68th Assembly District

Chairman Novak and members of the Committee,

Thank you for hearing Assembly Bill 527 today. Assembly Bill 527 will require the Department of Health Services to award grants to organizations or coalitions including cities, villages, towns, and counties for the purpose of sharing guidelines and training staff at a firearm retailer or range on avoiding selling firearms to persons who may be considering suicide, providing suicide prevention materials for distribution and providing voluntary firearm storage.

This bill is a recommendation from the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention. Its intent is to help firearm retailers and ranges become part of the solution when it comes to suicide prevention. I am proud to say that there are already businesses and various law enforcement agencies doing this in Wisconsin. The goal is to expand the network of groups who are part of the solution to suicide prevention. This bill will do just that.

When organizations and coalitions, specifically gun retailers and ranges have suicide prevention materials and offer safe storage it allows the retailer to be able to start the conversation with their customers on suicide. This bill gives retailers and various organizations the ability to start the conversation and bring the community together on the issue of suicide. I am proud to author this bill and get the conversation going on how we can bring our communities together and look out for one another when times get tough.



STATE REPRESENTATIVE
MELISSA SARGENT

WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY

48th DISTRICT

October 22, 2019

Chairman Novak and members of the Committee on Local Government, thank you for taking the time to hear Assembly Bill 527 today and this testimony.

Tragically, suicide rates have been increasing dramatically in our state, with Wisconsin's suicide rate rising 40% between 2000 and 2017. Further, we know that nearly 50% of all suicide deaths in Wisconsin are committed by firearm, and that access to a firearm triples one's risk of death by suicide. These devastating statistics are unacceptable, and it is our job as state legislators to take meaningful and holistic approaches to save the lives of our friends and neighbors across the state, and to prevent these tragedies from occurring in our communities.

This bill works to support and expand the great efforts already being done at the local level, such as the Gun Shop Project that safely stores firearms for community members without questions asked. AB-527 enables grant funding through DHS for these voluntary firearm storage programs, supporting those programs already in existence and opening the door for other communities across our state to implement these measures. Further, this bill provides the financial support and opportunity for other community based resources, such as the training of staff at gun shops or shooting ranges to recognize warning signs and react, and the providing of suicide prevention materials at these locations.

Gun shops, shooting ranges, gun shows, hunter safety courses, local meetings of hunting and sportsman heritage groups-- these are crucial pockets of our state that we must be reaching in our efforts to have these important conversations, reduce the stigma around mental health, and to prevent suicides from occurring. This bill is an important component in reaching these populations and ensuring that individuals feel supported in seeking help, and is a key piece of the larger solution when it comes to reducing suicide by firearm.

That being said, AB 527 is one measure amongst many others that must be taken up in order to truly address the high rate and lethality of suicide by firearm occurring in Wisconsin. Other pieces of legislation, supported by over 80% of Wisconsinites including gun owners, have proven nationwide success in drastically reducing the rates of suicide by firearm and in saving lives. To create the tangible results that Wisconsinites deserve, this body must give full consideration to the other steps necessary to address reducing suicide by firearm.

I am proud to support AB 527 and the important initiatives being implemented at the local level, while also calling on members of the Committee on Local Government, and all Wisconsin state lawmakers, to take action on comprehensive legislation that works to save lives in our state.

Thank you to Representative James for your bipartisan partnership and collaboration on this issue, and to the Committee on Local Government for your consideration of these lifesaving measures.

In 2009 in New Hampshire, in the course of less than a week, three people (with no connection to each other) legally purchased a firearm from the same store and killed themselves within hours of the purchase. The Medical Examiner's office brought this to the attention of their mental health liaison, and a small group of firearm retailers and mental health/public health practitioners met to explore whether there is a role for gun stores in preventing suicide. The group was later adopted by the NH Firearm Safety Coalition. The co-chair of the coalition has remained the same, it is the owner of the gun shop who transacted the fatal sales.

The project, called The Gun Shop Project developed materials with and for firearm retailers and range owners on ways they can help prevent suicide. Its objectives are to:

- Share guidelines on how to avoid selling or renting a firearm to a suicidal customer
- Encourage gun stores and firing ranges to display and distribute suicide prevention materials tailored to their customers

The Gun Shop Project is now nationwide, and the NH Safety Coalition freely shares all their materials. In Wisconsin, the project was launched in Dane County. I was the person who ran this project for Dane County and received positive support from the NH coalition as I adopted their materials.

The Gun Shop Project was widely accepted by gun shop owners (just one gave push back) but time has not permitted for me to revisit the shops in Dane County to see how many maintain their materials. I give full support for this project. It takes some time to set up, train and to produce the materials and secure partners but the relationship between the gun shops and the community partners is invaluable.

The Gun Shop Project is most valuable because of the partnership it brought from suicide prevention advocates and gun shops. The foundation of the project is that safety is part of the gun and suicide prevention cultures. No one is immune from the tragedy of suicide, so with the focus on saving lives, there is a shared community-strengthening commitment for both partners, which fosters understanding and knowledge. This isn't anti-gun; this is anti-suicide.

Realizing that impulsive firearms suicides (people who make a gun purchase and use it immediately in their death) are 10% of the firearm suicides, yet firearms make up about half of all suicides, it meant The Gun Shop Project would work even better if there was a role for gun shops for people who already own firearms. This realization was a nagging problem for me, but when I stopped at Essential Shooting Supplies in Mount Horeb, I found the gun shop owner, Chuck Lovelace, with the answer.

Please note that in your assembly bill, I see a promising mash up. You have drawn on the positive ideas of The Gun Shop Project (prevention materials available in the store for customers, training for gun shop personnel to prevent selling or renting to suicidal customers) but I see you also included Safe Storage. Safe Storage as a project, was the answer to my nagging problem of reaching out to firearm owners who may be in a temporary crisis.

The more Chuck and I talked, the more we realized that by letting gun shops be the site of safe, temporary, voluntary storage of firearms, we could help people who were in crisis, owned firearms, and needed a respectful and understanding local storage place. I explained to Chuck that only two evidence-based strategies were proven to prevent suicides: Have primary care physicians diagnose and treat depression and keep firearms out of the hands of people for the time they were in crisis. Firearm suicides are often the result of both long-term problems (substance misuse and untreated mental illness) and short-term problems (despairs like relationship problems, job and financial problems, isolation, loss, hopelessness and a feeling of burdensomeness). During the time of these struggles, safe temporary storage of firearms, if not with a friend or family, could be offered at gun shops. As Chuck points out, he's not there to be your therapist, and he really doesn't need to know your personal trials, but he would very much like to have the role of providing safe, temporary storage of firearms. Safe Storage is voluntary, there is a small fee charged by the gun shop to keep it dignified and give the gun owner some skin in the game. Chuck and I developed paperwork for the storage, and Chuck can tell you more about the inventory details.

I support voluntary safe storage. Safe Storage holds enormous potential to save lives by providing safe temporary storage of firearms when people are in a crisis. A suicidal crisis can be transient, help can come in many forms for treatment, intervention, and support, but keeping people alive during this time and working hard to get them well takes an entire community—gun shops, coalitions, families, legislator

Chairman Novak and members of the Committee,

Good Afternoon, I want to first thank you for letting me come and speak today. As a Veteran, and a Gun Shop owner I was immediately drawn in when first approached by Safe Communities of Dane County to participate and be a voice for the suicide prevention program designed specifically for firearms retailers. The Gun Shop Project is a grass roots effort to educate the employees and owners of your small town gun shops on being able to recognize the signs of someone who may be in a time of crisis.

What drew me to the project is the way suicide has touched me and my family on many levels from family members, to fellow veterans, my son's classmate, and 2 customers of our shop. There are countless stories of how people are shocked and have/had no clue that someone was in a time of crisis and in need of a helping hand up. The Gun Shop Project really gives retailers a great set of tools to recognize and reach out to someone who just needs someone to recognize that they need help.

After seeing the program in action I was so excited to be a voice for Suicide Prevention and urged other retailers in Dane County to participate. After seeing the program and being a local ambassador I was sitting with Jean from Safe Communities and said we should look into offering a safe storage solution for people in a time of crisis who just need a time out from having their firearms readily accessible without having to get law enforcement or other authorities involved. The unfortunate truth is there are people who are uncomfortable getting these resources involved due to personal or perceived prejudices that they have.

Our program gives them a secure and confidential way to secure and reduce the immediate access to one of the popular means of suicide without judgment by providing storage in a temperature and humidity controlled fire resistant safe so there is no worry on their end about how the program works. We tag their gun with a tag that has a number or bar code and record it in a separate log we maintain to ensure compliance with the ATF rules and regulations. We ask when they come in to drop their firearms off that they come in with a trusted family member or friend. When we return their firearms post crisis we ask that they bring that person again for our protection as well as theirs. There are no set time limits or restrictions other than if they bring ammunition in with their guns we don't return it at pick up. This is just an additional step we use for our own piece of mind and protection.

While not all retailers may want to participate to the point we have by purchasing a fire safe that runs almost \$1,000 my wife and I felt strongly enough about this that we invested in the safe without a second thought. We truly feel that offering this service we are not only helping a person in a time of crisis, but also their friends, family, and the first responders who may be affected by a suicide by firearm. If we can help prevent one suicide then we have received a full return on our investment of time and money as each life is precious and needs to be cherished.

Assembly Bill 527 will offer much needed funding through grants to educate retailers on the signs of someone in a potential time of crisis and how to de escalate or interact appropriately with them and give us another priceless tool for suicide prevention.

I can't thank you all enough again for your time, support, and dedication to this critical bill. I especially want to thank the committee that spearheaded this by holding multiple hearings statewide on this difficult and trying subject. As a Father, Veteran, and Gun Shop owner I recognize the need to have as many resources available to not only help prevent suicide, but to build the courage and confidence in people to ask and reach out if they see someone who needs help.

Hi,

I'm Dan Marcon, Owner and Operator Marc-On shooting in Lake Hallie, Wi. On October 28th 2017 A man walked into my shop at about 10:50 AM and looked around at products. I greeted him and we spoke of his kids, his cabin, walking around the property and would like something to protect himself and his family from bears and such.

We looked at Semi-Autos and Revolvers. He said he would like to try a revolver at Marc-On. At Marc-On you can rent a gun to try on the range. We spoke of ammunition and he said he wanted to try the Smith and Wesson 357 Magnum.

I gave him the one on the wall and a box of ammo. I took his driver's license, he had been here before so he was in the system. I led him into the range and showed him how to run the system. I stayed with him for the first few rounds cleaning up. He then asked me to let him know when his half hour was up. I went out and sat behind the counter to check on my emails.

He shot about 25 rounds, he was shooting fast then started shooting very slow and aiming on about 25 feet. He looked over at me and I said he had about 15 minutes left. He shot another 7 rounds re-loaded and shot 3 more and on the 4th one from that cylinder he put the gun to the back of his throat and pulled the trigger.