

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF VANESSA GARRETT HARLEY
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PHILADELPHIA
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

Monday, September 23, 2019
Harrisburg, PA

Chair Baker, Chair Farnese, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today at this important hearing examining the epidemic of gun violence.

As the Deputy Managing Director of Criminal Justice and Public Safety for the City of Philadelphia, and the person appointed by Mayor Kenney to lead the implementation of our comprehensive, citywide strategy to reduce and prevent gun violence in Philadelphia, I write in support of this Committee taking further action to ensure guns are kept out of the hands of those who are a danger to themselves or others.

First, I want to thank this Committee and the Legislature as a whole for the passage last year of Act 79 which adds provisions to strengthen the process of gun relinquishment for cases of domestic violence. You will save lives with those changes and we are grateful for your action.

The changes in Act 79 are ones we should build on for future legislation—they do not impact legal gun owners, but will make us safer from people we all agree should not have access to guns: those who are already required by Pennsylvania law to relinquish their weapons. We urge you to consider applying the common sense provisions of Act 79—which shorten the time for relinquishment and remove the option of relinquishing to friends and family—to all persons prohibited from gun ownership under Pennsylvania law. These are individuals who pose a risk to themselves and to others, but the inability to enforce existing laws in a meaningful way renders the prohibitions ineffective. Law makers, law enforcement officers, and public health advocates agree that a mainstay of effective gun policy is to enforce existing laws. We urge you to take that opportunity.

There is another group of individuals who are breaking the law and creating danger that we urge you to focus on: straw buyers and gun traffickers. There are several changes that Pennsylvania should adopt that will help crack down on those who illegally buy and sell the guns that are at the root of many of the homicides in Philadelphia and other cities across the state:

- **Limit purchasing volume or frequency** (e.g., “one gun a month”) **to combat illegal trafficking** with exceptions for those who would have a legitimate reason for frequent purchases;
- **Strengthen the ability of law enforcement to track gun sales and transfers** to identify and fight trafficking;

- **Require timely reporting of lost or stolen guns**, to help distinguish law abiding gun owners (who will report guns that they lose) from traffickers (who use the loss of a gun as an excuse when a gun they purchased is used in a crime).

I know this committee has been considering the passage of an Extreme Risk Protection Order that would allow a court to order the temporary removal of firearms from individuals who pose a risk of harming themselves or others. We support this bill as one tool that could be helpful in preventing gun-related deaths, including suicide, which accounts for over half of gun deaths in Pennsylvania. The ability to protect an individual in crisis affects not only that individual, but their family and community as well.

But the gun violence epidemic looks different in different communities across Pennsylvania. In Philadelphia, our homicide rate is more than five times the suicide rate. In 2018, we had 351 homicides in Philadelphia; the vast majority involved a firearm. We also had more than 1,400 shootings that same year, and survivors are left to grapple with physical and mental trauma. In Philadelphia, firearm homicide is the leading cause of death for young non-Hispanic black males. Children in too many Philadelphia neighborhoods hear gunfire as a part of their daily lives—too many know someone who has died. That is why our final, most important request is that you **update state law to allow Pennsylvania cities and counties to enact the gun regulations that are needed in their communities to protect the health and safety of their residents.**