



**TESTIMONY OF THE CRITICAL ISSUES FORUM: ADVOCACY
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
ON OCTOBER 10, 2023
BEFORE THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL
REGARDING BILL 36-23
SALE OF FIREARMS OR AMMUNITION – SUICIDE AWARENESS AND FIREARM EDUCATION
(SAFE) ACT
FAVORABLE**

Honorable Council President Glass, Council Vice-President Friedson, and Co-Sponsor Council Members: Albornoz, Stewart, Sayles, Katz, Balcombe, and Jawando

The Critical Issues Forum: *Advocacy for Social Justice* (CIF), provides this testimony in support of BILL 36-23 – Sale Of Firearms Or Ammunition – Suicide Awareness And Firearm Education (SAFE) Act. This legislation provides essential provisions to promote the safe storage of firearms and ammunition to education to prevent death by suicide. SAFE Act provide specific display and distribution requirements for sellers of firearms that complements Maryland's Jaelynn's Law requiring the Deputy Secretary for Public Health Services to develop a youth suicide prevention and firearm safe storage guide.

Composed of Temple Beth Ami, Kol Shalom, and Adat Shalom, CIF is a coalition of synagogues that include over 1,750 families and three denominations of Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. CIF is a vehicle for our congregations to speak out on policy issues that relate to our shared values, including the Jewish tradition's emphasis on the primary value of human life. Gun violence prevention is a top priority.

Firearms are the leading cause of death in children and youth ages 1 to 21 in Maryland and the United States, surpassing injuries and death from motor vehicle crashes.¹ Nationally, deaths by suicide and homicide, particularly from firearms, increase with age. In Maryland, 135 children and teens died by gun violence in 2020. This was more than twice the number of deaths from motor vehicle crashes.² It is outrageous and intolerable that gun violence is now the leading cause of death for our children.

¹ CDC WISQARS On-line Causes of Injury-Related Death Data Base, Violence-related Firearm Deaths; Both Sexes; Age Range: <1 – 21; All Races and Ethnicity; US and Maryland; 2020.

² Ibid

To help keep children safe, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), representing 67,000 pediatricians, has called for stronger common-sense firearm legislation, including strengthening background checks, supporting effective extreme risk protection orders, encouraging safe firearm storage, banning assault weapons, and addressing firearm trafficking.³ The AAP reports that about one-third of American children live in homes with firearms and 43% of those households have at least 1 unlocked firearm. Thirteen percent (13%) of households with guns contain at least 1 firearm that is unlocked and loaded or stored with ammunition. Tragically, suicide attempts involving a lethal firearm are fatal (91%) compared with those involving drug overdoses (23%). The increased risk of suicide is particularly striking for younger persons where guns are stored loaded and/or unlocked.⁴

Marylanders, like so many other Americans, are struggling with staggering loss, isolation, and the resultant mental health impacts resulting from the COVID19 pandemic. Properly securing firearms prevents access to lethal weapons and the likelihood of unintentional firearm injury, death by suicide, and interpersonal / domestic violence. The SAFE Act will strength the need for education and awareness of gun purchasers at the point of sale of the importance of safely securing their firearms to limit access to unauthorized vulnerable people.

SB 858 provisions are particularly important given the increased gun sales in Maryland—a more than 76% increase in the first 11 months of 2020 over 2019 as evidenced by FBI background investigations.⁵ Gun sales of January 2021 compared to January 2020 increased by 134 percent.⁶ A significant portion of those gun purchases, 40%, were first time gun owners who may or may not know about the best safe storage practices.⁷

A 2017 study concluded: “Pediatric firearm injuries and deaths are an important public health problem in the United States contributing substantially each year to premature death, illness, and disability of children.”⁸ The study authors found that “most children who died of unintentional firearm injuries were shot by another child in their own age range and most often in the context of playing with a gun or showing it to others...children are curious about firearms and will touch a firearm even when instructed not to do so, which points to the importance of adult supervision and the need to store firearms safely and out of the reach of children.”⁹

Research demonstrates that adherence to these guidelines by safely storing firearms can significantly reduce adolescent and young adult injuries and deaths.⁹ This study

³ <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/gun-violence-prevention/>

⁴ <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/state-advocacy/safe-storage-of-firearms/>

⁵ Rising gun sales put more lives at risk | COMMENTARY; Baltimore Sun Editorial Board; Baltimore Sun; Dec 07, 2020.

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/02/03/gun-sales-january-background-checks/>

⁷ Background Checks. A Metric for Gun Sales, Hit All-time High, Baltimore Sun, July1, 2020.

⁸ Fowler KA, Dahlberg LL, Haileuesus T, et al. Childhood Firearm Injuries in the United States. Pediatrics. 2017; 140(1): e20163486.

⁹ Monuteaux, Michael C., et al. Association of Increased Safe Household Firearm Storage with

concluded that youth suicides could decline substantially if only an additional 20% of gun owning households began safely storing their firearms. A 1997 study concluded that the first 12 state laws limiting child access to firearms resulted in a 23% lower than expected number of unintentional firearm-related deaths.¹⁰ A later study found that these laws were associated with a 10.8% reduction in firearm suicides overall and an 11.1% reduction in suicide rates for older youth age 18-20.¹¹ As this study noted, these “laws may encourage gun owners... [with young children] to adopt safe practices that endure” after their children are older, and “may increase awareness and change social norms to encourage gun owners to secure firearms...” In short, literature about firearm safety, suicide prevention, and conflict resolutions can help to save lives.

Given the increasing risk of death by suicide involving a firearm, Bill 36-23 smartly supports using and distributing the Maryland Deputy Secretary for Public Health Services being developed focused on youth suicide prevention and firearm safe storage guide. The Safe Act common sense modifications to Maryland’s current law for the safe storage of firearms will enhance the safety of our state’s youth, protecting them and their parents from needless tragedy. The provisions are consistent with the latest recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics.¹²

CIF urges the committee to produce a favorable report supporting Bill 36-23 to strengthen awareness of the importance of safe and secure storage of firearms for preventing death by suicide and saving lives.

Firearm Suicide and Unintentional Death Among US Youths, JAMA Pediatrics , 2019; 173(7):657-662. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.

¹⁰ Cummings P, Grossman DC, Rivara FP, Koepsell TD. State gun safe storage laws and child mortality due to firearms. JAMA. 1997; 278: 1084-1086.

¹¹ Webster, Daniel W., et al. “Association Between Youth-Focused Firearm Laws and Youth Suicides.” JAMA, 2004; 292: 594. doi:10.1001/jama.292.5.594

¹² Lee, L; et al; Firearm-Related Injuries and Deaths in Children and Youth: Injury Prevention and Harm Reduction. PEDIATRICS Volume 150, number 6, December 2022:e2022060070