

PREPARED TESTIMONY OF MIKE REESE, FORMER PORTLAND POLICE CHIEF
The Need for Background Checks: Keeping Guns Out of the Hands of Criminals
April 1, 2015

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today regarding the proposed legislation to expand criminal background checks to all gun sales in Oregon. As the former Chief of the Portland Police Bureau, I was responsible for the safety of people in the City of Portland, and for the safety of the police officers protecting our community. Like other major city police chiefs in this country, one of the threats I worried about most was gun violence. And keeping people safe from gun violence was one of our top priorities.

I believe one of the best ways to make sure that a person buying a gun, has a legal right to own a gun, is with a simple, straightforward background check. Current law rightfully prohibits certain dangerous people from having guns, such as felons, domestic abusers, and people with severe mental illness.

Background checks, combined with rigorous enforcement, are the surest way to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. But right now it is far too easy in Oregon for a prohibited person to avoid a background check by simply buying a gun from an unlicensed seller.

Websites such as armslist.com make it easy for criminals to connect with unlicensed sellers. For criminals our current system is ideal. No background check, no verification, and no documentation.

Let's be clear; under SB 941, a person wanting to purchase a gun could still go to armslist and find a willing seller. The only difference is that instead of meeting in a parking lot or a home, the buyer and seller will meet with a licensed gun dealer, who will run a background check on the buyer to make sure he is not prohibited from having guns. Since Oregon has four times as many gun dealers as post offices, this is a convenient and safe way to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. In fact, nearly all Oregon residents live within 10 miles of a licensed gun dealer authorized to run criminal background checks.

I own firearms. And if I were to sell one of my guns, as a responsible owner I would want to know that the buyer wasn't a criminal. SB 941 creates an easy way for responsible gun owners to make sure their firearm doesn't end up in the hands of a criminal, used to commit a violent crime.

I coach youth basketball at Wilson High School in SW Portland. Last year as I helped coach our women's team, one of my officers was shot just a block away from Wilson. The person who shot my officer was a convicted felon with a warrant out for his arrest and was wanted in the kidnapping of a woman. We know from our investigation that this man was stalking young women at nearby schools. I'm thankful that the officer survived this encounter and was able to protect himself and our community from an incredibly dangerous criminal armed with a gun.

Just a few weeks ago, two Portland officers were fired upon by a gang member who was wanted as an escapee from a Federal halfway house. We're fortunate those officers were not injured.

SB 941 will expand our current law to help keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people like these through background checks on all gun sales. As a retired Chief of Police and law enforcement officer, I believe this bill is a reasonable and responsible approach.

I ask for your support of this important legislation.