



Oregon Public
Health Association

April 1, 2015

Oregon Public Health Association
818 SW Third Avenue, #1201, Portland, OR 97204
www.OregonPublicHealth.org

Chairman Prozanski and Members of Oregon Senate Committee on Judiciary,

My name is Josie Henderson and I am here as a public health professional to submit testimony on behalf of the Oregon Public Health Association in support of Senate Bill 941. This legislation is a common sense measure that will help prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands and reduce premature deaths and injuries in Oregon.

The Oregon Public Health Association, or OPHA, is an affiliate of the American Public Health Association that has more than 500 members in every county in the state. We are health educators, doctors, nurses, researchers, professors, community leaders, and citizens who are committed to improving the health of every Oregonian. One key component to achieving this goal is reducing the substantial number of premature deaths caused by gunfire in the state. Every day, someone in Oregon dies as a result of gun violence. In 2013 alone, 462 people across the state were killed with a gun.ⁱ And since 2009, more deaths in the state have resulted from firearms than from motor vehicle accidents.ⁱⁱ This trend of gun violence shows no sign of changing unless we take action: gun deaths in Oregon, particularly driven by suicides, have steadily increased each year since 2011.ⁱⁱⁱ

The scope of gun deaths in Oregon makes this one of the primary public health challenges facing the state and it warrants a comprehensive solution. SB 941 is a critical part of that solution. This legislation would prevent dangerous individuals who are prohibited from gun ownership from having easy access to guns through private sales that currently do not require a background check. Closing this loophole and requiring background checks for all gun sales would have a significant impact on gun violence in the state: states that have enacted similar legislation have lower rates of many types of gun violence, including domestic violence-related gun murders and law enforcement officers shot and killed. Suicides comprise the majority of gun deaths in Oregon, and in states that have comprehensive background check laws, 48 percent fewer people commit suicide with a gun.^{iv}

Successful solutions to other public health crises have demonstrated the effectiveness of a comprehensive public health approach. In this case we have identified the problem: easy access to guns in Oregon by prohibited purchasers, such as domestic abusers and the severely mentally ill, has created an epidemic of gun violence. A public health response to this crisis focuses on prevention and in reducing access to guns by people who could be a danger to themselves or others. A key component of reducing dangerous access to firearms is requiring background checks on all gun sales. Research shows that failing to act is not only tragic, it is also very costly: In 2010, the American Public Health Association found that gun violence cost the American economy \$174 billion.^v

Background checks are a common sense proposal that involves one simple idea: prevent people who are prohibited from purchasing guns from being able to buy them. The vast majority of Oregonians support this idea: A January 2015 poll found that 87 percent support requiring a background check on every gun sale in the state.^{vi} Public health professionals have one goal, and that is to protect Oregonians' health by preventing the leading causes of disease, injury and death. Gun violence is one of the leading killers of Oregonians, and is unequivocally a public health issue that demands a comprehensive solution. Universal background checks are part of that solution and OPHA supports the proposal before the committee today and urges its swift passage.

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "WISQARS™ Fatal Injury Reports," available at http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html (last accessed March 2015).

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Everytown for Gun Safety, "Background Checks Reduce Crime and Save Lives," available at <http://everytown.org/documents/2014/10/background-checks-reduce-crimes-and-save-lives.pdf>.

^v American Public Health Association, "Gun Violence Prevention," available at https://www.apha.org/~media/files/pdf/fact%20sheets/gun_violence_prevention.ashx.

^{vi} Hannah Hoffman, "Gun background checks returning to Oregon Legislature," *Statesman Journal*, January 30, 2015, available at <http://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/politics/2015/01/29/gun-background-checks-returning-oregon-legislature/22539803/>.