



STATE REPRESENTATIVE

# JESSE JAMES

Chairman Testin and members of the Committee,

Thank you for hearing Senate Bill 543 today. Senate Bill 543 is a recommendation from the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention and will require the Department of Health Services to award grants to organizations or coalitions for the purpose of 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, temporary firearm storage.

This bill's intent is to expand on efforts already being done, such as the Gun Shop Project that safely stores firearms for community members without questions asked. The Gun Shop Project helps firearm retailers and ranges become part of the solution when it comes to suicide prevention.

The grant money will allow them to purchase extra safes to store firearms for people who feel they need to give up their firearms for a period of time while they are going through crisis. It will also allow them to receive training to spot signs of suicide in their customers and be able to ask tough questions to their customers about how they are feeling. Every day, firearm retailers and ranges interact with their customers who buy and use firearms. It makes sense to give them more resources to help their customers who may be in a mental health crisis and be considering suicide.

At the end of the day, we are all human beings who need others to look out for us. We need to be able to have conversations that are sometimes uncomfortable to save someone else's life. 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.

I am proud to author this bill and start the conversation on how we can bring our communities together and look out for one another when times get tough.



November 20, 2019

Chairman Testin and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, thank you for taking the time to hear Senate Bill 543 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. SB-543 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, SB-543 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 SB-543 and the important initiatives being implemented at the local level, while also calling on members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, and all Wisconsin state lawmakers, to take action on comprehensive legislation that works to save lives in our state.

Thank you to Representative James, Senator Bernier, and Senator Carpenter, for your bipartisan partnership and collaboration on this issue, and to the Committee on Health and Human Services for your consideration of these lifesaving measures.



**STATE SENATOR KATHY BERNIER**  
TWENTY-THIRD SENATE DISTRICT



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**From: Senator Kathy Bernier**  
**To: Senate Committee on Health and Human Services**  
**Re: Testimony on Senate Bill 543**  
**Relating to:** grants related to preventing suicide by firearm and making an appropriation.  
**Date: November 20, 2019**

Thank you Chairman Testin and committee members for allowing me to submit testimony on Senate Bill 543. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with Rep. James on this important piece of legislation.

Senate Bill 543, recommended by the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention is meant to help mental health professionals and firearm retailers and ranges become more knowledgeable and helpful in situations that may escalate into a suicide involving firearms. This bill would also allow families experiencing a possible mental health emergency to voluntarily store their firearms in a safe place while they get through their time of crisis.

This bill hopes to build on The Gun Shop Project from New Hampshire. The Project was created after three unrelated people purchased firearms from the same New Hampshire gun store and eventually killed themselves. The local medical examiner's office noticed this coincidence and brought it to the attention of a group that would become the New Hampshire Firearm Safety Coalition. The Coalition's main goal is to bring mental health providers, firearm retailers and firearm rights advocates together to find ways to help prevent firearm-related suicide.

This Project's objectives are to share guidelines on how to avoid selling or renting a firearm to a suicidal customer and to encourage gun stores and firing ranges to display and distribute suicide prevention materials tailored to their customers. Twelve states, including Wisconsin, have already embraced in the Project in some way. Gun ranges and stores in Wisconsin are already providing voluntary storage with no questions asked to families in need.

This legislation seeks to make the Gun Shop Project's initiatives available to gun retailers and range owners statewide. This bill directs the Department of Health Services to award grants to organizations that will train staff at firearm retailers/ranges on how to recognize people who may be considering suicide, provide materials relating to suicide prevention to retailers and ranges, and provide voluntary, temporary firearm storage. The program is voluntary and no gun store or range is required to participate. We do hope they will all take advantage of this important program to better serve their customers and communities.

This bill won't solve Wisconsin's firearm-related suicide problem, but it will help those in crisis by allowing them to store weapons worry-free when they are aware of a potential mental health problem as well as making sure that retailers have access to the information they need to recognize the signs of a firearm owner or buyer in crisis. Please vote to recommend Senate Bill 543 for passage. Thank you again for allowing me to submit testimony on this important bill.



State of Wisconsin  
2019 - 2020 LEGISLATURE

LRBa0681/1  
KP:skw

**ASSEMBLY AMENDMENT 1,  
TO ASSEMBLY BILL 527**

October 25, 2019 – Offered by Representative JAMES.

1 At the locations indicated, amend the bill as follows:

2 **1.** Page 2, line 11: delete “or county,” and substitute “county, or federally  
3 recognized American Indian tribe or band located in this state,”.

4 **2.** Page 2, line 13: delete “share guidelines and”.

5 **3.** Page 2, line 14: delete “avoid selling or renting a firearm to” and substitute  
6 “recognize that”.

7 **4.** Page 2, line 14: delete “who”.

8 **5.** Page 2, line 17: after “voluntary” insert “temporary”.

9 (END)

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 (the largest gun shop in New England) and killed themselves within hours of the purchase. The Medical Examiner's office brought this to the attention of their mental health liaison. 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 joint project, called The Gun Shop Project, was the result of firearm retailers and range owners working together to 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. These materials were created in collaboration with the gun shops and mental health advocates.

The Gun Shop Project has been replicated nationwide. In Wisconsin, the project was only launched in Dane County. I was the person who ran this project for Dane County and I received positive support from the NH coalition as I adopted their materials.

The Gun Shop Project was widely accepted by the 15 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.

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 from both partners, which fosters understanding and knowledge. Working together, the focus isn't anti-gun; this is anti-suicide.

Impulsive firearms suicides are defined as (people who make a gun purchase and use it immediately in their death). While gun suicides are almost 50% of all

these struggles, safe temporary storage of firearms, if not with a friend or family, could be offered at gun shops. And the good news is an acute suicidal crisis can be temporary, lasting just a short time like a few days or weeks. As Chuck points out from his end of this deal, he's not offering to be your therapist, and he really doesn't need to know your personal issues, but he would very much like to have the role of providing safe, temporary storage of firearms during a crisis.

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 strongly support voluntary safe storage; I guess you could say this is my special project. 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 again takes an entire community—gun shops, coalitions, families, legislators.

**6. I'm concerned I'll be sued if I refuse to make a sale or rent a firearm to someone who passes the background check.**

The two largest gun shops in NH and ME have never been sued for this reason. Stores and ranges are NOT violating 2nd amendment rights by refusing a purchase or rental if we suspect something isn't right; it is well within our legal rights to deny a transaction (as long as this denial is not simply based on a person's race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or sex). In fact, there have been instances where store owners have been sued by the family of someone who purchased a firearm and killed themselves soon after.

**7. Customers could be acting funny for other reasons besides suicide—first time customers are often a little nervous and don't know anything about guns.**

It's hard to know for sure if someone is suicidal. The Tip Sheet is meant to help your staff identify customers who exhibit some "red flags." Usually new customers are eager to hear purchasing advice from staff and will gladly respond to questions we may ask as we try to help them select the best firearm for their purposes. It's those who are reluctant to converse with staff about the purchase, or who seem to be troubled, who require extra caution. You should "go with your gut" and your experience.

**8. The Tip Sheet says one in ten firearm suicides were with recently purchased guns. That sounds like a lot—I've been in business for many years and never thought a customer was suicidal.**

It sounded like a lot to us, too. But that number comes straight from the office of the NH Medical Examiner. When the ME's office investigates a death, sometimes they'll find a receipt for the gun in the victim's pocket or next to the gun, so they know it's a recent purchase. Hopefully you and your staff will never come across a suicidal customer but being prepared should that unfortunate day come could save a life.

**9. I have had a customer purchase a gun for suicide, and he didn't exhibit ANY warning signs at all. You can't always spot people who are serious about killing themselves.**

There's no way all suicides can be prevented. But there have been occasions when a dealer asked a person who seemed shaky whether they should really be buying this gun and they admitted they were considering suicide. One family wrote our co-Chair (owner of Riley's Sports Shop) and said that his question saved their mother's life. The more ambivalent someone is about suicide, the greater the opportunity for intervention.

**10. What do I say to a customer who keeps a gun at home for self-defense but is worried about someone at home who's going through a rough time?**

It depends on how that gun is stored. If a customer's loved one at home (or with keys to their home) is going through a rough time, they may want to re-evaluate the accessibility of that firearm to that person. Suicide may be the bigger threat that your customer has to guard against in the short term until the situation improves.