

Testimony Presented to the Democratic Policy Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Hearing Re: House Bill 525
September 3, 2019

Submitted by Donna Cooper
Executive Director, Public Citizens for Children and Youth

I am testifying today on behalf of Public Citizens for Children and Youth. We are a 40-year old organization dedicated to improving the lives and life chances of children. We unite people across the political spectrum to work together for smart policy changes that can make a significant difference. On my board are individuals who are staunchly in favor of greater restrictions on the sale of firearms and members of the NRA. We support measures to ensure all guns are safely locked, unloaded and that there are penalties for failures to do so under reasonable circumstances. House Bill 525 has our full support.

The founders of our organization were inspired by the impressive work begun in the 1960's to protect children from injury or death while in a car. I believe the history of that work is instructive and relevant to this hearing today.

When I was a kid, I can't remember ever hearing that one of my friends was injured or killed by a firearm. But it was not surprising to hear that a friend was in the hospital after a car accident. In fact, my only friend who didn't live long enough to graduate had his young life cut short by a car accident.

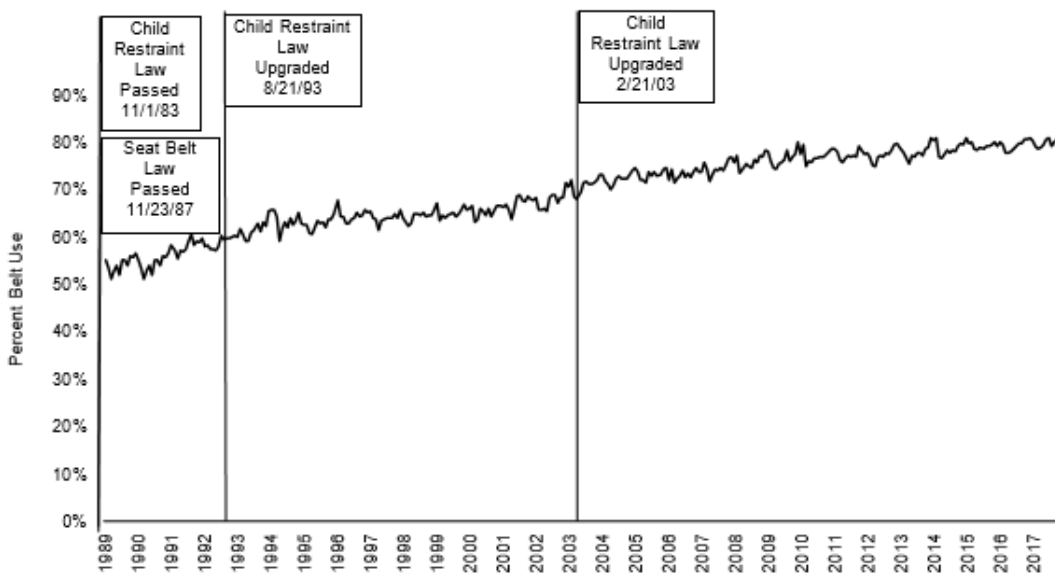
Today, the chances of my friend Cliff making it to graduation are twice as high because by 1968 adults across the country began to pass laws that made our cars safer. It was a hard fight that the car industry opposed. They used the same arguments to stop seatbelts that we hear today about safe gun storage and trigger locks. In 1968, adults used their common sense and followed the research rather than lobbyist spin and protected our children by passing laws requiring that cars have safety belts and later reforming those laws to both make it an offense not to wear them and require parents to restrain their babies in car seats.

The champion of seatbelt laws in PA was Ed Early, who was a member of the State House and Senate from Allegheny County. He responded in the following way to those who claimed that the law would be useless because too many people would ignore it, and others who claimed it was too intrusive to invade a man's car and take away his freedom to drive as he pleased:

“Just because the State Police do not bother to enforce the law requiring a car to have two headlights that are lit does not mean that we should abolish the law. Just because the State Police do not go out and check the trucks going through our State for the decals, they are supposed to have does not mean we should abolish the law. Just because people do not enforce the law is no reason to abolish the requirement that we protect the safety of our children.... Mr. President, I do not want to draw this out, but I have to take exception to the comments that have been made; harassment and unfair to the motorist? I think what is extremely unfair is a child who will die in an automobile because the parents were not smart enough to buy this restraint or put them in. I think that is unfair. Harassment, the purpose of any legislation dealing with penalties is not to harass anyone. The purpose is to make sure no one gets hurt.... All they are forced to do is buy some protective item so the individual child riding in the car will not get killed. I think we owe it to the parents to force them to do this, and I certainly agree we owe it to the children not to let them die in an automobile because someone is afraid of being harassed.”

In many ways the discussion today about House Bill 525 mirrors those old debates about protecting children from vehicular injury or homicide. Many argue safe storage laws will simply be ignored because parents already know the risks.

I urge you to look at this chart that is in the 2017 PennDOT report on highway statistics:



And what made them work was legislators acting on behalf of children, and, passing laws that make clear that parents needed to buckle up their kids. Fortunately, as the PennDOT chart illustrates most parents comply. To be sure, seatbelt laws that aren't the only improvements made to cars and driving regulation that made children safer, but the data is very clear that seat belts worked. Seat belts alone are associated with saving about 15,000 lives. And what made them work was legislators acting on behalf of children, and, passing laws that make clear that parents needed to buckle up their kids. Fortunately, most parents comply.

Here's how I know that same approach, which is embodied in House Bill 525 makes sense.

I went to high school only 20 miles from here. I graduated as a Springfield Spartan in the class of 76. Nine years ago, a high school junior used an AK 47 to kill himself in the lobby of Springfield High. That promising junior was an Eagle Scout and a volunteer firefighter for the township. He regularly hunted and practiced shooting with his dad. He knew how to use firearms responsibly.

Sadly 17% of all children in high school report that they've had serious suicidal thoughts. And a small percentage act upon those thoughts quickly and with finality. Like that promising high school student who impulsively took his life, those who use a gun will succeed 95.3% of the time. It's certainly not the only way to commit suicide but it's the surest.

Today he is one of thousands of children that are the statistical basis of the data that tells us that suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for youth ages 10-19, and that firearms were used in 43% of these horrific acts.

And, his suicide wasn't that unusual. Eighty percent of adolescent suicides are committed with gun that a child finds in his or her home.

But suicide is not the only way kids access to guns in their home puts that at risk. An estimated 4.6 million children live in homes with firearms that are locked and loaded. Firearm accidents where children harm themselves or other children are on the rise, more than 5,000 children were injured by the guns in their homes based on the most recent stats, and another 1300 lost their lives. The risks of childhood gun injury or death is especially high in states like ours where gun ownership is also above average for the nation. Recent data indicates the Commonwealth ranks 20th in the nation for guns per capita with more than 236,000 registered guns stored in homes, work sheds, cars and businesses across the state. We must face facts that that's a lot of guns and lots of opportunity for firearms to get in the hands of unsupervised children.

Even in the hands of those like that Springfield student, who are taught the basics of responsible gun ownership, it's too simply too dangerous to children not to regulate gun storage.

As cars became ubiquitous in the 50's and 60", society learned the hard way, that we had to fight the industry and demand regulatory controls to save lives. That's what the seatbelt and child seat battles were all about. Since then, injury and death due to motor vehicle crashes have steadily declined over the last 20 years. During the same period, death and injury due to firearms has remained about the same.

Worse yet, the rate of death from firearms among youth 14 to 17-year olds is 22.5% higher than motor vehicle-related death rates. When the legislature made it an offense not to wear a safety belt, compliance went up and that's what we should expect would happen after the enactment of HB 525.

Surveys tell us that about 30% of adults across the country report owning a firearm and 42% report living in a household with firearms. As more families have guns, you must do more to make sure children are safe.

The good news is that surveys of gun owners tells us that 54% of those with guns have their firearms locked away. The bad news is that 46% percent of gun owners do not. For the children in those homes, for the children who visit those homes, House Bill 525 could be the difference between life and death. Far too many parents believe that their own children may know responsible gun ownership and only hide their guns so that other children can't access them to harm anyone or themselves. It doesn't enter their mind that they must protect their children from themselves.

Research demonstrates that responsible gun storage practices are associated with reduced rates of child firearm suicide. In fact, when guns are locked, unloaded, separated from the ammunition, the data finds less risk of self-inflicted and unintentional firearm injuries among children and teenagers — up to 85 percent depending on the type of storage practice. We would support amendments to House Bill 525 that put all those provisions in place.

Polls are clear that gun owners who believe in gun rights want you to do more to require that guns be safely stored, and they demonstrate support for charging adults when they fail to store their guns safely as proposed in House Bill 525.

I want to comment you for wisely including in the legislation common-senses exemptions from the safe storage requirement if the firearm is being carried or in close proximity to the adult who owns the firearm while in their own home. This provision permits gun owners who believe they need their gun for self-protection while in their home can have it *at the ready*

and not be in violation of the law. For someone living in a risky situation who believes they are competent enough to use a gun for protection, House Bill 525 is clear that they are permitted to carry, or have their gun near them, at all times.

Requiring safe storage, the establishment of the graduated offenses for failing to responsibly ensure these storage practices are in place, and the exception for a gun owner who believes he or she must carry or have their gun close while they are home for safety has our full support.

This same approach of establishing a safety standard with enforcement provisions saved thousands of children from injury or death in cars and I thank you for working to take this proven approach and apply it to what is clearly a rising risk to our children, unsafely stored guns in their homes.