



Physicians Caring for Texans



**House Homeland Security and Public Safety  
Written Testimony on House Bill 316 by Rep. Donna Howard  
March 20, 2019**

Chair Coleman and members of the committee, the Texas Medical Association, representing nearly 53,000 physicians and medical students, is pleased to express our support for House Bill 316 by Rep. Donna Howard. Our testimony today addresses the importance of improving public awareness of firearm safety to prevent firearm accidents, and also of the growing need to take action on suicide prevention.

The United States has the highest firearm homicide and firearm-related suicide rates of all high-income countries.<sup>1</sup> Texas had more firearm-related deaths – 3,353 – than any other state – a rate of 12.1 per 100,000 (2016).<sup>2</sup> Physicians are alarmed that suicide is now one of the top 10 leading causes of death in the United States and one of only four causes with significant rate increases. Half of nation's 44,000 suicides in 2016, more than 22,000, were by firearm. Males consistently have the highest rates in all age groups (more than 80 percent of all firearm suicides), and the rates rise among older age groups. The U.S. suicide rate by firearm increased 21 percent from 2006 to 2016 (for people more than 10 years old). Like the rest of the country, Texas' suicide rate has increased; our suicide-by-firearm rate of 7.3 is higher than the U.S. rate of 6.5 (per 100,000).

Firearm mortality is the second most common cause of death among U.S. children, and firearm homicide, suicide, and unintentional discharge are the major factors in both child injury and fatality. With an estimated 400 million firearms in this country, likely hundreds of thousands of homes have at least one firearm. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that most parents believe their children will not touch a firearm or do not know where firearms are kept or can be accessed in the home. But in 2015, 609 Texas children were injured or died by a firearm. More than 200 of these were deaths from a suicide, assault or homicide, accidental firearm discharge, or with an undetermined intent. More than half of these child deaths were homicides, and most deaths were in children aged 15-19 years.

Texas' requirements for the safe storage and security of a firearm are critical to support the prevention of theft or the misuse of firearms by adults and children. We know most parents with firearms in the home will talk to their children about firearm safety, but not all do this – increasing risk in the home and especially with both adults and children who are prone to make an impulsive decision. The public health data tell us that children who are with an untrained or otherwise careless adult or a friend with access to a firearm are most likely to be injured or killed in an unintentional discharge.

Keeping firearms away from people who present a risk of harm or who are unable to make sound decisions provides a strong base for managing firearm safety. But having strong state laws on firearm safety will not adequately ensure protection as long as the public is not aware of these requirements or of other measures to reduce firearm accidents and access to firearms for those at risk of harm to themselves. We believe Representative Howard's proposal to conduct a statewide campaign on firearm safety and suicide prevention can be an effective measure so the public knows how they can help prevent these injuries and deaths.

TMA does not take a position on the regulation of the use and possession of firearms. We recognize that about 40 percent of the U.S. adults own one or more firearms or live in a home where a firearm is present. In Texas, gun ownership is associated with an individual's personal freedom, and protection is a key reason why many own one or more firearms. Our members remain focused on proven prevention and harm reduction methods in all areas of public and population health. Physicians have a role in addressing gun violence and firearms safety. We are talking to our patients about safety measures in the home including the measures that will prevent firearm mortality and morbidity. We encourage you to take action to approve House Bill 316, and we offer our assistance with implementation of this important legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> Grinshteyn E & Hemenway D, Violent Death Rates: The U.S. Compared with Other High-income OECD Countries, 2010, *The American Journal of Medicine*; Richardson EG, Hemenway D, Homicide, suicide, and unintentional firearm fatality; comparing the United States with other high-income countries, *J. Trauma Injury, Infection, and Critical Care* 70: 238-43.

<sup>2</sup> Louisiana, Alabama, and Alaska had the highest rates of firearm mortality in the country in 2016 (21.3 to 23.3 per 100,000).