

Medical News & Perspectives

Physicians Join Frontline Efforts to Curb Gun Injuries, Deaths

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Fed up with the toll gun injuries take on their patients, physicians from Chicago's top hospitals took an unusual step late last October. They joined Illinois lawmakers during a news conference to endorse state legislation requiring licensing for gun dealers.

"It represents the galvanizing of shared hospital-level advocacy on one of the most important public health issues of our time," said Matt Davis, MD, director of Academic General Pediatrics at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. Others at the event included physicians from the University of Chicago, Rush Medical Center, and the Illinois chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

"I attended the news conference because gun violence is a public health emergency affecting the children and families that we care for physically, emotionally, and psychologically," Sherald Leonard, MD, assistant professor of pediatrics at Rush, explained in a statement.

Three weeks earlier, the largest mass shooting in US history had claimed at least 58 lives and left more than 500 wounded in Las Vegas. On the first Sunday in November, 26 people were shot to death in a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. These high-profile tragedies garner profuse news coverage, yet they account for a fraction of US gun injuries and deaths. In fact, gun injuries are now the third leading cause of death among children and adolescents nationwide.

In response, growing numbers of physicians refuse to stand on the sidelines. Some are calling on state and national legislators to pass laws intended to curb gun violence. Others, facing legislative gridlock in many parts of the country, are turning to education and partnerships with gun owners to promote gun safety.

"The tragic drumbeat of recurring episodes of gun injuries and deaths for children and adults alike will hopefully encourage lawmakers to take more rather than less action," Davis said.

Grassroots Growth

The mass shooting in 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School propelled Portland, Oregon, pediatrician Lisa Reynolds, MD, to join [Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America](#), a grassroots organization that promotes tougher gun laws. The group currently backs legislation to close loopholes in the background check system to prevent purchases by individuals—like the Sutherland Springs' shooter—who are legally barred from gun ownership.

"Like so many people, I was feeling disturbed about the rate of gun violence in our communities," Reynolds said. She acknowledged feeling frustrated and heartbroken by the more recent mass shootings in Las Vegas and Texas. Since

those attacks, she said she has seen an uptick in physician interest in gun safety activism.

"My physician friends are approaching me more and more on how to get involved," Reynolds said. "The tide is turning."

In Michigan, retired family physician Jerry Walden, MD, and Andy Zweifler, MD, a professor emeritus of internal medicine at the University of Michigan, have watched the [Physicians for the Prevention of Gun Violence](#) (PPGV), a grassroots organization they launched in 2007, grow from about a dozen members to more than 500. The group was founded in the wake of the Virginia Tech shooting, and its members testify regularly about gun legislation in Michigan.



"There is no question that just being physicians, you have a little extra leverage," Zweifler said. "There is respect that we are professionals and that our concerns are not selfish and have to do with [community safety]."

Illinois' state senate delayed consideration of the bill Davis and his colleagues backed until next year. The delay was frustrating, said Davis, given the urgency of the situation with more 3000 Illinois

that promotes violence prevention and resilience in children affected by violence. It includes a diversion program that redirects youth from the juvenile justice system into mental health care programs and other social services

The members of the PPGV speak regularly with physicians and medical students. They have partnered with [Sandy Hook Promise](#), a group founded by the parents of children killed at the Newtown,

Connecticut, school, which promotes inclusion and encourages students and others to seek help when an individual shows signs of wanting to hurt themselves or

others. They also promote the American Academy of Pediatrics' [ASK](#) (Asking Saves Kids) campaign, which encourages parents to ask if there are unlocked guns where their children play.

"When I look at what we do, we are in it for the long run," Zweifler said.

"I think the education work is ultimately more productive [than legislative efforts]."

Finding Common Ground

Some physicians are trying to move past political polarization by partnering with gun owners.

Reynolds found an ally in lifelong gun-owner and fellow gun-safety advocate Paul Kemp. A gunman at an Oregon mall killed Kemp's brother in 2012. In the wake of the shooting, Kemp and family and friends of the other victims cofounded [Gun Owners for Responsible Ownership](#). A majority of gun owners support new restrictions on firearms, particularly universal background checks, Kemp noted. But their views often aren't represented in the public debate.

"We felt that voice was missing," Kemp said. The organization has partnered with Reynolds and other physicians promoting gun safety through educational efforts and supports tougher gun legislation. Reynolds, who like many physicians was unfamiliar with guns, said she has learned from Kemp about "the nuts and bolts of safe gun storage." Now, she

shares this information in her gun safety presentations to physician and public health groups.

"We are natural allies," Kemp said.

Two-thirds of US gun deaths are suicides, according to the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). In states like Colorado, 78% of gun deaths are suicides. So, Emmy Betz, MD, MPH, an associate professor of emergency medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, has taken her suicide prevention message to ladies nights at shooting ranges and gun dealers across the state. She cofounded the [Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition](#) with fellow physician Michael Victoroff, MD, a gun owner and physician at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, state public health leaders, and gun owners.

"As a physician, it has enriched my point of view about the views of firearm owners and the strong commitment to safety [they] have," Betz said. "It has been a wonderful way to learn from each other and figure out how to best tailor messages to reach the people who need them most."

The program is modeled after the [Gun Shop Project](#). The New Hampshire initiative paired public health experts and gun owners to develop suicide prevention materials. Within 6 months, the materials were displayed by 48% of firearm dealers in the state. The message was simple: "If a family member or friend is having a difficult time, offer to hold on to their firearm for them until the crisis has passed," said Ralph Demicco, a former gun dealer and cofounder of the project. "I know it works from personal experience. I've had clients who were saved by a thoughtful friend."

The idea has caught on, with 20 similar initiatives springing up around the country. The trick, said project member Mary Vrinotis, MS, a research specialist at Harvard's Injury Control Research Center, was staying focused on suicide, steering clear of politics, and respecting each other's expertise.

That sentiment was echoed by Sarah Denny, MD, medical director of the [Partnership for Safety of Children Around Firearms](#), which pairs the Ohio chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics with local firearm owners to promote safe gun storage.

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residents—one-third of them from outside Chicago—treated in hospitals for gun injuries in 2016, according to [Lurie Children's Hospital](#). Davis noted that gun violence in Chicago often dominates news coverage, but gun injuries are a problem statewide.

"We recognize that legislative change happens more slowly than we would like to see given the serious health consequences of this particular problem," Davis said. "But we continue to be hopeful that policy makers see how important it is to reduce gun-related injuries in our communities."

Federal funding [restrictions](#) have limited gun injury and violence research efforts. Some states have looked to create their own research centers to fill the void. For example, a state-funded gun violence research center was launched at the [University of California, Davis](#), this year, and a New Jersey [bill](#) proposed creating a similar research center.

In the current political climate, passing federal gun safety legislation may be impossible, acknowledged Nina Agrawal, MD, national gun violence prevention campaign coordinator at Doctors for America. This makes education interventions and other local and state efforts increasingly important.

At Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago, physicians are working with community groups and other health organizations on [Strengthening Chicago's Youth](#), a program

"Everyone learned from each other," Denny said. "Gun owners learned pediatricians are not trying to take their guns away." The physicians learned to reframe the way they ask about guns. Recognizing that half of Ohio homes and 1 in 3 homes nationwide contain a gun, they now ask, "If you have a gun in the home, is it kept locked safely?"

"If we ask the question in a way that makes the family feel judged, it shuts down the conversation," Denny explained. "What we emphasize as we talk to pedia-

tricians is it is not a political issue, it's a safety issue."

Talking to their patients about gun safety is the most important thing all physicians can do, Zweifler emphasized. Some physicians may be wary of discussing gun safety, but Agrawal noted that in February 2017 a federal court struck down a Florida ban on such discussions.

"There is no [longer a] barrier to physicians talking to patients about owning a gun," she said. "In every state, physicians can talk to patients about gun violence."

For physicians unsure about the best gun safety advice, there are [resources](#) to help, Betz said.

She and other physicians working to prevent firearm-related deaths emphasized the need to tackle the problem from many angles.

"There is not one way to prevent gun violence," Agrawal agreed. "We need to prevent it from all ways. Every advocacy effort is important." ■

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.