

**STAND WITH
PARKLAND**



The National Association of Families for Safe Schools

Prepared Testimony

of

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before the

United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs

on

Examining State and Federal Recommendations
for Enhancing School Safety Against Targeted Violence

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Nothing is more important than the safety of our nation's children and I appreciate your decision to hold this hearing on school safety.

My name is Tom Hoyer. I am the Treasurer of Stand with Parkland – The National Association of Families for Safe Schools. Stand with Parkland was founded by the families of the children and school staff murdered in the Parkland school massacre on February 14, 2018 and I appear today on behalf of Stand with Parkland. I lost my 15-year-old son Luke on that day and have engaged in this activism because his death was preventable; it is our desire to keep any other parent from experiencing the profound loss that myself and others have gone through as a result of this tragedy.

We are now part of the many who bring a human face to these grim statistics: since Columbine there have been 710 school shootings in the United States; 341 people have been killed and 653 injured, including the seventeen killed and the additional seventeen injured in the Parkland shooting.¹ Using our unique and inclusive approach, Stand with Parkland has grown into a national organization focused on identifying and advocating for practical solutions that will keep our kids and teachers safe in school. We are fundamentally a non-partisan group. We believe that the safety of our kids and teachers in school is not a political issue and we will work with anyone who shares our goal for safe schools.

¹ Center for Homeland Defense and Security, "K-12 School Shooting Database," 2019.

Stand with Parkland's founding families have different political views, but when it comes to achieving safe schools, we all agree on three key factors: securing the school campus, better mental health screening and support programs, and responsible firearms ownership. We are committed to advocating for practical public safety reforms focused on these goals; without addressing all three of these components, we are not going to solve this uniquely American tragedy of mass shootings in schools.

Personal responsibility and a desire for change are paramount to this effort, and it will require action at all levels of government to make these goals a reality. Violence in our schools affects everyone. It is an American epidemic and it is time for us to come together as the American family to do something about it – to demand action from our elected leaders.

Even now, twenty years after Columbine, our nation is still grappling with this issue. It is extremely unfortunate that it took the murder of our loved ones at school to rekindle the national discussion. The voices of the surviving students kept this tragic story in the news. However, it has been the relentless pursuit of the facts and the determination of the victims' families that has driven change to both policies and laws across the country. Those changes began with the help of former Governor (now Senator) Rick Scott and the bipartisan support of the Florida legislature when the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act was passed in March of 2018. Stand with Parkland's advocacy began when our families spoke with lawmakers from both sides of the aisle about the importance of passing the law to protect students and staff members from harm. Our collective voice made a difference then and we will continue to use it to prevent anyone else from suffering a similar tragedy. We want to ensure that children and

staff members are safe at school and can focus on their true purpose: learning and growing into responsible young adults.

Our children are the future. This is a fairly common adage on which there is almost universal agreement. But it is not enough to merely acknowledge this and repeat it in public – that future is at risk and action is necessary. Before this tragedy, we had happy families. We had whole families. Now that is forever changed – our daughters, sons, and spouses never made it home from school that day.

When we look at the history of mass school shootings, we are here to point out that this issue affects all segments of America, all sharing the same misconception that it couldn't happen in their community. That false sense of security is dangerous.

This is not a Republican problem; it's not a Democratic problem; it cannot be laid at the feet of either end of the political spectrum or any group. This is an American problem that requires collective action. Our children are in danger; inaction in the face of that danger is not merely negligent but constitutes a dereliction of duty.

While our organization supports certain specific proposals, we recognize the importance of a fulsome discussion and building consensus as we develop and implement specific solutions. This model of discussion and willingness to compromise, while maintaining a steadfast commitment to meaningful action and fighting against mere window-dressing, was effective when we worked on school safety legislation in Florida – leaving partisan politics behind was instrumental.

As a result of this willingness to compromise, and the commitment to not permit perfection to stand in the way of meaningful progress, we supported the recent passage in Florida of SB 7030 — Implementation of Legislative Recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission, even though we did not agree with all of its provisions.

While Stand with Parkland supports armed guardians at schools, we believe that arming teachers is a misguided idea that could actually undermine efforts to safeguard our schools against mass shootings like the one that took our loved ones. We believe our teachers should be focused on teaching and trained law enforcement or school security officers should be provided to protect the students and staff at school. However, even though we opposed this provision, we supported the majority of the bill and accordingly worked to ensure its passage.

Our nation needs an open and continuous discussion, that leads to the collective development of specific solutions. Stand with Parkland is firm in its advocacy for a wholistic approach toward improving the safety of all the nation's schools by:

- 1) Securing the school campus
- 2) Improving mental health screening and support programs
- 3) Supporting responsible firearms ownership

All of these issues must be addressed in a meaningful way and we have developed specific proposals that can help achieve our goals in each of these areas:

Securing the Campus – The Parkland shooter walked onto campus through an open and unmonitored gate; even though he was identified as he entered campus, nobody called a code red until more than three minutes after the shooting started. Furthermore, the school did not have an active-shooter policy or any plan for dealing with school shootings.

Securing the school campus starts with securing the perimeter and creating a single point of entry. Other low-cost items such as locked doors, safe corners in classrooms, and active shooter policies and drills are vital to protecting America’s schools. Taking these straight-forward steps will give our students and teachers a chance of survival when confronted by a school shooter. I want to emphasize that we must encourage all of our school administrators to prepare for an active shooter by having a policy in place and training students and staff accordingly. In this same spirit, it is essential that we develop a federal standard for minimum school safety features and best practices, as well as bring the resources of our federal government to bear. We need Congress to provide continuous federal funding of school security enhancements, upon which state and local governments can rely.

There has been some progress – the Departments of Health and Human Services, Justice, Education, and Homeland Security are working together to create a clearinghouse website that will serve as a national resource. This clearinghouse will provide school safety best practices collected from various schools and related organizations. My colleague, Max Schacter, a founding member of Stand with Parkland and CEO of Safe Schools for Alex, has worked to promote this initiative from the beginning. Our organization has continued to be involved in this process and our entire membership strongly supports its continued development. In light of the

potential impact of this project, we hope that the Senate can lead the way with a bipartisan bill that will codify and provide funding for this groundbreaking initiative.

Improving Mental Health Screening and Support Programs – To improve mental health screening, support and intervention we need to take actions such as funding and promoting suicide detection and intervention programs because 67 percent of mass shooters are suicidal.² Additionally, congressional action is needed to relax and clarify Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations, so that schools, law enforcement and mental health professionals are allowed to share mental health information, as well as permit the release of mental health information for threat assessments and background checks. Fixing these issues will allow for more effective use of the provisions enacted by the STOP School Violence Act, which was contained within the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, and other existing laws. Permitting this exchange of information would allow a team of professionals – including school counselors, police, and mental healthcare providers – to assess at-risk individuals and likely prevent tragedies like the one that took our loved ones.

My son’s killer, we’ve since found out, was known to the school, the sheriff’s office, a local mental health agency, and the FBI – he was known to all of them as an angry, violent, and potentially dangerous person. They never shared information about him; they never connected the dots. Because of this, Luke’s killer was able to purchase a rifle legally. Had an effective threat assessment been conducted, and a corresponding exchange of information permitted, there

² US DHS, US Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center March 2018.

may have been a better understanding of just how dangerous this individual was – my family could be whole today.

Additionally, more research is required to support threat assessments and their efficacy. The U.S. Secret Service’s National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) is dedicated to the advanced research that is the basic building block of all threat assessments. In today’s environment of ever-increasing threats, the NTAC needs more funding and resources. One path to provide this is through bipartisan legislation that has been introduced in both chambers, the Eagles Act. This bill is named after Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School’s mascot and would help provide a lasting legacy to our beloved children and spouses who were murdered that day. We urge the Senate to consider and vote on this important legislation, which will help protect not only students and staff members but help prevent any American from being subjected to similarly targeted violence.

Stand with Parkland also urges Congress to provide funding to support and implement successful “off the shelf” programs, such as Sandy Hook Promise’s Know the Signs or It Starts with Hello. Additionally, there is a proven suicide prevention product developed by Columbia University, The Columbia Protocol, which provides an evidenced based threshold for determining imminent risk. This protocol has already been adopted by the Department of Defense and many other governmental agencies. In fact, a total force roll-out by the Marine Corps helped lead to a 22 percent reduction in suicides.³ These are only a few of the highly effective non-governmental

³ Columbia University, “C-SSRS Helping to Reduce Suicide and Decrease Workload via Evidence-Based Thresholds for Imminent Risk,” 2016.

programs that could use a boost from the federal government to expand their reach and improve the safety of America's students and teachers.

Supporting Responsible Firearm Ownership – There are many elements that contribute to responsible firearms ownership. This starts with enforcing the laws already on the books and personal responsibility. Owners of firearms must ensure they are practicing safe firearm storage, such as ensuring they are kept out of the reach of children, because many school shooters get their weapon from the home.

Another important area is Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPO), or Red Flag laws, which can save lives by creating a way for family members and law enforcement to act before a situation escalates, providing an opportunity for the individual subject to the order to get help. ERPOs also touch on the mental health pillar of our holistic approach to school safety; they are powerful tools that enable law enforcement officers to protect themselves and the community at-large. In the wake of the Parkland tragedy Florida enacted Red Flag laws with strong bipartisan support; as of this past February, thirteen states had these powerful law enforcement tools in place and it is likely that they have already saved many lives. Had these laws been in place on February 14, 2018, the numerous warnings regarding the murderer of our loved ones would have provided law enforcement a chance to remove the firearms from his home and Parkland would still be an idyllic town and our families would be whole instead of broken.

This year, Senator Rubio has reintroduced the Extreme Risk Protection Order and Violence Prevention Act, with bipartisan support. This bill would utilize Department of Justice funds to encourage states to enact laws that provide law enforcement or family members the option of

obtaining a court order to prevent firearm purchases and possession by individuals who pose a significant threat to themselves or others, while providing due process protections. We strongly urge Senators to support this bill and hope it is swiftly brought to the Senate floor for a vote.

Finally, our nation must improve the current background check laws and make them more comprehensive. This can be achieved through legislation like H.R. 8, “the Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2019” that has passed by the House of Representatives and we urge consideration and passage of similar legislation by the Senate. We need to do more than just talk about these measures – the American public expects that our representatives will take meaningful action to protect our children.

While we commend our national leaders for taking some action, such as the recently issued final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety, which was created by the Trump Administration, these actions have continued the trend of only partially addressing the issue. The report contained recommended changes that address the first two items in our holistic approach, securing the school campus and better mental health programs, but little is mentioned regarding firearms. It is clear that the status quo is ineffective, or our loved ones would not have been shot and killed in their school on February 14, 2018.

We hope that the vast majority of Americans, who are in the ideological middle, come out and support the change for which Stand with Parkland – The National Association of Families for Safe Schools is advocating. Continued conversations about how we can’t agree and what we don’t agree on will not make our children safer. This Congress, and the nation as a whole, needs to have an open discussion and actively listen to one another. This cannot be a rhetorical battle

centered around partisan messaging and talking points – every step we take must be meaningful and make our children safer. We will be failing in the duty to protect our children and future generations of Americans if all we do is talk and take symbolic steps.

I would like to conclude by saying that there can be no more excuses. The safety of students and teachers at school is something that this country can unite around. We must stop the divisive rhetoric and work together to stop these uniquely American tragedies. Surely, where it concerns the safety of our children, there is more that unites than divides us.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear today and your willingness to address this vital matter.