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U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution
Stop Gun Violence: Safe Storage
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Thank you, Chairman Blumenthal, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify here today.

My name is Dr. Maya Haasz, and I am here today representing Children's Hospital Colorado and the Colorado Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. I am here to speak in favor of bills that would improve the safety of our children.

I have been a Pediatric Emergency Medicine physician for 10 years. In that time, I have seen many firearm injuries, including in children as young as two years old, which could have been prevented by safe firearm storage requirements. The lucky ones survive, with any number of visible scars to go along with the emotional and psychological trauma they and their families carry forward. Those who do not survive leave behind a world of grief. The cry of a parent whose toddler has died is agonizing. When a child has been fatally shot playing with their sibling or in any number of preventable situations, the added layers of guilt and "what ifs" add a new, almost tangible, layer of pain for all involved.

Firearms are the second leading cause of death in children, ahead of cancers and heart disease.¹ Thirty-five percent of these firearm deaths are suicides and four percent are due to unintentional injuries. More than 17 children in the US are injured by a firearm every day² and more than 32 die every week, on average.³ In my home state of Colorado, a child is injured by a firearm every 1.3 days and one child dies every week,

¹ Cunningham RM, Walton MA, Carter PM. The Major Causes of Death in Children and Adolescents in the United States. N Engl J Med. 2018 Dec 20;379(25):2468-2475.

² Based on three most recent years of complete data (2013, 2014, and 2016). Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project, last accessed June 25, 2020, hcupnet.ahrq.gov.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), "Fatal Injury Reports," last accessed Apr. 1, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>. Calculations include children ages 0–17 and were based on the most recently available data: 2014 to 2018.

on average.⁴ Something has to be done to protect our kids from the dangers of unsecured firearms.

I thought about this a few months ago when a 14 year-old was brought to the Emergency Department after a suicide attempt by drug overdose. Minutes after his attempt he felt a moment of remorse and told his parents what had happened. They called an ambulance, we treated him, and he survived.

This same story happens multiple times a week. After receiving medical and emotional care, these patients get another chance at life and the vast majority will not go on to die by suicide.

Firearms, however, are uniquely lethal. I walked back to my desk after taking care of that 14-year-old boy knowing that he probably would not have been alive for us to treat had he used a gun instead of medications. Most who attempt suicide by firearm do not have the chance to change their mind, and most should never have had access to a firearm in the first place. Over 90% will die.⁵ For adolescents, over 80% of these deaths will occur with a gun found in the home⁶ and most of these guns belong to a parent.⁷

These are the realities I see play out in my line of work every day, and over the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated my job as a pediatric emergency physician. I've had to adapt to new protocols and adjust who can visit the sick children on our floors. I learn ever-changing processes, keeping pace with new evidence. And I've had to assuage my patients' anxiety while managing my own worries.

However, COVID also showed us what's possible when research and public awareness are combined to save lives. As this crisis progressed, public health professionals developed new protocols such as masking and social distancing, medical health professionals got better at treating coronavirus patients, and communities stepped up to

⁴ Carl Armon, PhD, Jessica Cataldi, MD, Edwin Asturias, MD, Cameron Todd, James Todd, MD, "Fatal and Nonfatal Firearm Injuries Compared to Automobile Injuries in Colorado Children," <https://www.childrenscolorado.org/496703/globalassets/healthcare-professionals/firearm-and-auto-injury-1999-2019.pdf>

⁵ Andrew Conner, BS, Deborah Azrael, PhD, Matthew Miller, MD, MPH, ScD. "Suicide Case-Fatality Rates in the United States, 2007 to 2014." *Annals of Internal Medicine*. (December 2019) <https://doi.org/10.7326/M19-1324>.

⁶ Simon, Thomas R., Alan C. Swann, Kenneth E. Powell, Lloyd B. Potter, Marcie-jo Kresnow, and Patrick W. O'Carroll. "Characteristics of Impulsive Suicide Attempts and Attempters." *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 32, no. s1 (2002): 49–59. <https://doi.org/10.1521/suli.32.1.5.49.24212>.

⁷ Johnson, Renee M., Catherine Barber, Deborah Azrael, David E. Clark, and David Hemenway. "Who Are the Owners of Firearms Used in Adolescent Suicides?" *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 40, no. 6 (December 2010): 609–11. <https://doi.org/10.1521/suli.2010.40.6.609>.

stop the spread. Now, there's a little less fear and uncertainty, and while we're not out of the woods yet, we're far ahead of where we were.

This needs to happen with gun violence, too.

The idea that we can solve problems in this manner isn't new—in fact we've seen it play out before in other industries. For example, when a greater emphasis was put on researching the effectiveness of things like seat belts, child safety seats, improved safety standards for cars, better roads, driver licensing programs, and teen drinking and driving awareness campaigns, new requirements were created based on the data and the rate of deaths from motor vehicle crashes among children and adolescents decreased by 38% between 2007 and 2016.⁸

In contrast, the rate of firearm-related mortality among children and adolescents has remained stable over the same period, and in 2020, our hospital treated more than double the number of firearm injuries as in 2019. What's the difference here? When it comes to firearm-related deaths, there is a distinct lack of data-supported public health interventions supported by state, local, and federal governments, particularly around safe storage.

This is not just a public health issue, this is a public health emergency, and it is our duty to act. We need to act as we did to address deaths from motor vehicle collisions and COVID-19, when we looked at the data we collected, and made evidence-based decisions that would improve the health of our population. In doing so, we didn't need to resort to drastic measures like taking away cars, and instead, we researched ways to make cars and roads safer. The same can be done with firearms if we take similar steps.

This year has seen record numbers of firearm sales⁹ and 4.6 million minors in the US currently live in homes with at least one loaded, unlocked firearm.¹⁰ Individuals experiencing crises with access to firearms are in serious danger, as are women and children vulnerable to domestic abuse. For them, home can't be a refuge until we act.

⁸ Rebecca M. Cunningham, M.D., Maureen A. Walton, M.P.H., Ph.D., and Patrick M. Carter, M.D. The Major Causes of Death in Children and Adolescents in the United States, *N Engl J Med* 2018; 379:2468-2475, (December 2018) <https://www.nejm.org/doi/10.1056/NEJMs1804754>.

⁹ Based on Giffords Law Center calculations of adjusted NICS data. "NICS Firearm Background Checks: Month/Year," Federal Bureau of Investigation, last accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/nics_firearm_checks_-_month_year.pdf/view.

¹⁰ Deborah Azrael, Joanna Cohen, Carmel Salhi, and Matthew Miller, "Firearm Storage in Gun-owning Households with Children: Results of a 2015 National Survey," *Journal of Urban Health* 95, no. 3 (2018): 295–304

While federal law does make it unlawful for any licensed firearms importer, manufacturer or dealer to sell or transfer any handgun unless the transferee is provided with a “secure gun storage or safety device,” it does not require gun owners to properly store their firearms when children are present. Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia have some form of law to do so. Numerous studies over the past 20 years have found that laws like these can reduce suicide and unintentional gun deaths and injuries among children and teens by up to 54%.¹¹

Because of my background, I testified in March before the Colorado State Legislature in support of such a law. That bill was thankfully enacted. I urge the members of this Subcommittee to consider and act upon similar legislation at the national level, including Chairman Blumenthal’s bill, S.190, *Ethan’s Law*. This bill would set a national standard for the storage of firearms in residences where children live and would encourage states to enact similar standards by offering federal funding to help law enforcement and the courts enforce and facilitate compliance with these standards. I also support Senator Blumenthal’s *Safe Gun Storage Act*, which would establish consumer product safety standards for firearm locks and firearm safes.

I come here as a researcher, a mother, and a Pediatric Emergency Room physician. But mostly, I am here as an advocate for child safety.

I am here for the playful 5-year-old boy who was paralyzed from the waist down by a stray bullet that struck him when he was playing outside a year prior, who now has to come to the emergency room whenever he has a fever.

I am here for the toddler who arrived at our hospital after being shot while playing with her sibling. For her family, who will agonize over her death and whether they could have prevented it.

I am here for the many other youth who, in their moment of crisis, found a gun to use in their suicide attempt instead of a bottle of pills. These kids, unfortunately, never make it to the hospital. I wish I could share their names, their faces, more of their stories so you can understand that these could be your neighbors, your grandchildren, your children.

¹¹ Emma C. Hamilton, et al., “Variability of Child Access Prevention Laws and Pediatric Firearm Injuries,” *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery* 84, no. 4 (2018): 613–619. See also, Peter Cummings, David C. Grossman, Frederick P. Rivara, and Thomas D. Koepsell, “State Gun Safe Storage Laws and Child Mortality Due to Firearms,” *JAMA* 278, no. 13 (1997): 1084–1086; Daniel W. Webster, Jon S. Vernick, April M. Zeoli, and Jennifer A. Manganello, “Association Between Youth-focused Firearm Laws and Youth Suicides,” *JAMA* 292, no. 5 (2004): 594–601; Jeffrey DeSimone, Sara Markowitz, and Jing Xu, “Child Access Prevention Laws and Nonfatal Gun Injuries,” *Southern Economic Journal* 80, no. 1 (2013): 5–25.

I know that the vast majority of gun owners keep their firearms safely away from children and adolescents; however, too many do not. Keeping children safe should not be a choice. I implore you to pass legislation that will help ensure that their firearms are properly locked so that children do not have access to them. No more broken families, no more needless injuries and deaths.

Thank you.