

Written Testimony

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Before the U.S. House of Representatives Gun Violence Prevention Task Force

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Chairman Thompson, Vice Chairs, and all members of the Gun Violence Prevention Task Force:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today and for the Task Force's leadership since 2012 to push for legislative action to reduce gun violence in our country. I am here today on behalf of National PTA, the nation's oldest and largest child advocacy association, with congresses in all 50 states, DC, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Department of Defense schools in Europe. Since 1897, National PTA has been a strong advocate and a reputable resource for millions of parents, teachers, grandparents, caregivers, foster parents and other caring adults who share a commitment to improving the education, health and safety of all children. We speak with one voice for every child.

As the president of National PTA, I have seen firsthand the impact these shootings have on our nation's families. Alongside their ABCs, our kindergartners sing songs to remind them to run and hide during active shootings. Parents and teachers desperately try to plan for how they would protect children should the worst happen—and are sometimes forced to turn that plan into action, as one mother did in my home state of Texas, dying as she used her body to shield her 2-month-old baby in El Paso.

No parent should fear for the safety of their child every time they leave home for school or anywhere else and no child should live in fear every day wondering if this is the last day they will see their family. According to Everytown for Gun Safety, there have been 471 incidents of gunfire on school grounds including colleges and universities since the Sandy Hook shooting in 2013. Thousands of children across the country have been victims of, or witnesses to gun violence in their homes, schools, or communities. At PTA, we have issued so many statements on mass shootings at schools over the years that we now keep a draft on hand at all times. In every statement, we remind the nation that our students deserve to have a safe environment in which to thrive and learn. In every statement, we urge Congress to do more. Now is time to act. Doing nothing is unacceptable.

For almost 30 years, National PTA has advocated for gun safety and violence prevention. Since 1990, our association has articulated the need for common-sense and comprehensive gun safety and violence prevention measures. Conversations about school safety, gun safety and violence prevention cannot be just about video games, violent programming and mental health. Our nation's leaders must acknowledge and address the ease of access to firearms and weapons of war.

This August I published an op-ed asking Congress to return from its summer recess to take action to enact common-sense proposals, such as passing red flag laws that temporarily limit access to firearms for those who may endanger public safety, universal background checks, funding for gun violence research efforts, and banning assault weapons—all of which a majority of Americans support. Unfortunately, Congress did not return to Washington, D.C. this summer to address this epidemic, so here I am today, asking again for change on behalf of children and families. We have said, "Enough is Enough." Yet, too often, we are met by "thoughts and prayers" from our elected leaders. I would like to remind Congress that we don't elect leaders to offer thoughts and prayers. We elect them to build and enact solutions to painful problems—and gun violence is a very painful problem.

Background checks can and will save lives. This common-sense gun safety and violence prevention measure would have saved seven lives and prevented injuries to 25 people in my hometown of Odessa, Texas. It would have prevented traumatic injuries to Anderson, the 17-month-old daughter of our family's assistant pastor at church, Kelby. Anderson is a toddler. The only pain she should know should be from scraped knees while learning to walk.

Instead, little Anderson was shot through her bottom lip and tongue and lost all of her front teeth because a man was able to purchase a semi-automatic rifle thanks to a loophole in our federal gun laws that allows private or unlicensed vendors to sell guns without conducting a background check on the purchaser. This man was barred from purchasing or owning a firearm, but because Congress and our President have failed to act, Mary Granados, Leilah Hernandez, Edwin Peregrino, Joe Griffith, Rodolfo Julio Arco, Kameron Karltes Brown, and Raul Garcia are no longer with us, 25 other innocents like Anderson are recovering from their injuries and countless others are dealing with the trauma from witnessing this event.

Kelby was just going about her typical Saturday afternoon errands, going to the grocery store as any mother would do, with her twins when Anderson was shot in the backseat of their family car. As a mother and grandmother myself, I can't imagine the fear she felt in that moment as her daughter was shot and her other child sat, horrified, in the backseat next to her. Every mother knows that primal instinct to protect your children. Kelby did everything she could to protect her twin daughters—but there was nothing she could have done to prevent her baby from being shot by a man who should have never had a gun in the first place.

Seven people in my community were going about their Saturday routines when their lives where abruptly ended. It's hard for me to grasp that, despite these tragedies happening over and over. I've heard the argument that no matter what you do, or what laws that you put in place there will be those that will break the law. I get it. I do. You could make that argument about speed limits, people break them every day. But does that mean we shouldn't have them? No. They prevent accidents. They save lives. We need speed limits, just like we need universal background checks.

The question I'm asking today is, do our elected officials, including our President, value our nation's children and families enough to put a law in place that protects them the best that it can, or will they continue to do nothing?

We want more than thoughts and prayers. We deserve more. We are demanding that the United States Congress and President act in the best interest of this nation. To be clear—National PTA is not about taking away an individual's Second Amendment right. What we are about is ensuring there are laws that eliminate the current background check loophole for gun shows and private and online sales.

My husband was a police officer in Texas and every member of my family is a gun owner. Gun ownership is not the issue here, the issue is the ease of access to firearms and assault weapons, especially for those who pose a danger to themselves and others. Congress must enact legislation that will help prevent future tragedies from occurring, while preserving the lawful use of firearms for sport and personal protection. The Odessa shooter bought an assault rifle at a private sale, when he should have never been able to purchase a weapon. According to news reports, he failed a background check in 2014 when attempting to purchase a firearm.

Universal background check legislation would make our communities and schools safer by requiring a background check for virtually every firearm sale and transfer—a common-sense measure supported by 97% of Americans. Our association is appreciative of the U.S. House of Representatives' passage of H.R. 8, the Bipartisan Background Checks Act—which our association endorses. The bill includes reasonable exceptions like transfers among close family members and short-term gun loans among hunters and sport shooters. The legislation does nothing to impede lawful gun purchases and closes off a wide and well-known pathway for illegal transactions by prohibited, and often dangerous, buyers. Implementing comprehensive background checks before every gun sale would save thousands of lives, by keeping guns out of the hands of those who should not have them.

Now, it is the Senate's turn to act. Last week, I urged Senate Majority Leader McConnell to bring S. 42, the Background Check Expansion Act to the floor and facilitate its passage in the Senate, to address our nation's gun violence epidemic and protect America's children and families.

Today is a day for action. The Senate needs to pass and the president must sign this bill as a reasonable first step to addressing gun violence in this country.

Thank you for this opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions members may have.