

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 11, 2013

Vice President Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20501

Dear Vice President Biden,

We write to thank you for your work to reduce gun violence, and to assist you in that work. The recent shootings in Newtown, Connecticut reminded Americans of the horror that is possible when one deranged person can gain access to dangerous weapons. The weeks after this terrible mass shooting have been filled with grief and pain, as we have seen firsthand, but the strength and courage of the families and the community should inspire us to prevent gun violence in the future. While we may never be able to prevent all mass shootings, we can certainly take reasonable steps to reduce the number of incidents and the potential fatalities. As we continue to receive input and advice from conversations with the parents of Sandy Hook Elementary School children, Connecticut's law enforcement community, educators, mental health experts, and community leaders, we offer the following recommendations for reforming America's gun laws.

First, we wholeheartedly support a new and expanded assault weapons ban that includes a ban on high capacity magazines. As you know, a study by the Department of Justice found that the previous ban was responsible for a nearly 7 percent decline in total gun murders. However, since the ban lapsed, assault weapons have been used in more than 450 incidents, resulting in nearly 400 deaths. These military-style weapons and high capacity magazines were a major factor in the terrible events of Newtown, Tucson, Oak Creek, Aurora, Columbine, Virginia Tech and other mass shootings, and we owe it to the victims and their families to reinstate the assault weapons ban and limit magazines to 10 rounds.

Additionally, it's clear that we must take steps to improve the National Instant Criminal Background Check system (NICS). As a November 2011 report by the Mayors Against Illegal Guns showed, millions of records identifying seriously mentally ill people and drug abusers as prohibited purchasers are missing from the federal background check database because of lax reporting by state agencies. In addition, many federal agencies still do not report the necessary information to the database. Furthermore, we need to institute universal background checks for gun purchases. Currently, it is estimated that 40 percent of gun purchases are completed without a NICS background check. As a result, private sales, as well as sales at gun shows and on the internet are conducted without a background check. These loopholes provide easy access to guns for individuals who otherwise could not pass a background check.

While many recent mass shootings have involved assault weapons and high capacity magazines, another common thread has been that the gunmen all either had a history of mental illness or signs of mental health issues. As President Obama noted in announcing this effort, "we

need to make access to mental health care at least as easy as access to guns.” We applaud President Obama for recognizing the critical importance that mental health will play in developing a comprehensive approach to these tragedies and we stand ready to assist in this effort. To do so, we must recognize that our public mental health system is inadequately funded and private insurance often erects barriers to accessing care. One recent estimate found that states have cut over \$4 billion in public mental health spending from 2009-2012, and more than 3,000 psychiatric beds have been lost during the same period. As a result, it is estimated that only about one third of those with moderate illness and two thirds of those with severe illness ever receive any care at all.

Further, we must require background checks for sales of ammunition. Today, if someone wants to purchase a firearm from a licensed dealer, he will be asked to go through a background check. Law-abiding citizens generally need wait only 30 seconds or so to clear an instant background check. Over the last decade, such checks have kept roughly 700,000 guns out of the hand of felons, fugitives, domestic abusers, drug addicts, and the mentally ill, among other unauthorized purchasers. Ammunition dealers ask for proof of age and nothing more. By requiring background checks on sales of ammunition, we can put one additional strong obstacle between a potential mass murderer and the tools to destroy lives and devastate communities.

We would also recommend that you work to develop rules that will encourage firearm manufacturers to create safer guns. In doing so, we ask that you require of the gun industry what is already required of most other industries. In other areas, consumer regulation ensures that companies move gradually towards safer products. Unfortunately, gun manufacturers have been largely immune from such regulation. As a result, when it comes to developments in gun safety, time has largely stood still. More than twelve years ago, when Senator Blumenthal was Connecticut’s Attorney General, he worked with Smith & Wesson and law enforcement officials to reach a settlement in which the firearms company agreed to immediately begin producing guns that would recognize their owners’ grip—guns that could never be accidentally fired by a child or stolen by a burglar and used against a homeowner. Twelve years after that settlement, gun manufacturers still fail to produce the kinds of innovative products that would make their owners and the general public safer. We need to create a system of laws that moves gun manufacturers in the right direction for their customers and for our communities. We hope to work with you to make it so.

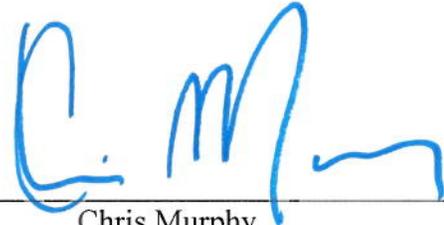
Finally, we urge you to find ways for federal law enforcement agencies to keep track of the millions of guns flowing through our nation’s communities. Currently, the Department of Justice must destroy records of gun purchases within 24 hours. If this had not been the case, it is possible that federal law enforcement agencies would have been able to know that Nancy Lanza was keeping an arsenal of guns near her disturbed son. Surely with all of the technology and expertise in the hands of the Justice Department we can find a way to keep track of gun purchases in a way that protects the privacy of law-abiding gun owners while giving law enforcement valuable information to stop the next Adam Lanza before he is allowed to kill.

These are just a few of the ideas that we should consider as we search for ways to prevent the next Newtown. We thank you for the work you have done in this area, and look forward to working with you in the future to identify common-sense reforms that can save lives.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate



Chris Murphy
United States Senate