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Governor



STATE OF WASHINGTON
Office of the Governor

Firearm Fatality Prevention – A Public Health Approach
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Remarks as prepared

Good morning, we know why we are here today because the scourge of gun violence continues to conflict pain on the heart that it cannot forget.

There are countless headlines and stories we will never forget.

In June 2014, a shooter at Seattle Pacific University took the life of a 19-year-old student and injured two others.

Just four months later, in October, the nation was horrified when a student at Marysville-Pilchuck High School opened fire in the cafeteria, killing four of his classmates before shooting himself.

In October of 2014, a 15-year-old Spokane boy was accidentally shot in the chest by a friend while playing with a gun.

Shortly before Thanksgiving, a drive-by shooting on Capitol Hill in Seattle sent five people to the hospital while another in Tacoma left a teen-ager dead.

You'll hear shortly from a mom of two young children who lost her husband to a firearm suicide.

There are countless more stories that we won't ever read about that have become tragically commonplace.

Every day, somebody in Washington state dies from gun violence.

These sobering events include suicide, homicide and tragic mishap. There are many factors at play but they all have something in common: use of a gun and a chance that the incident could have been prevented.

Gun violence is a crisis that has scarred thousands of families in every corner of our state.

It's a scourge we can, should and will help prevent.

We need to do something different in the fight against gun violence: This is a public health crisis that we're going to address with a public health approach.

That's why I'm announcing an executive order today that launches a statewide public health initiative to reduce and prevent gun related fatalities and injuries and implements the new suicide prevention state plan.

This is a fundamentally different approach to addressing gun violence and suicide.

It's a data-driven approach that helps us identify the people and places most susceptible to gun crime and suicide.

For example, we know there are hot spots of gun crime in Washington state including right here in Burien.

We know certain populations of Washingtonians are more susceptible to gun crime or suicide. Certain groups such as Native Americans, veterans and white males are at higher risk of gun-related suicide, while African American youth are disproportionately more likely to be a victim of homicide by firearm.

We know firearms are used in most domestic violence homicides, and in more than half the cases, the perpetrators were legally prohibited from owning firearms.

We also know it doesn't need to be this way.

I've watched Congress fail for years to make any kind of progress on this issue. In fact, they've passed laws prohibiting even basic research and data collection on gun violence in America.

Yet, while Congress protects the status quo of everyday gun violence, leaders of states, cities and counties – including

Executive Dow Constantine here in King County – are moving forward with sensible policies to reduce firearm fatalities.

We are not afraid to take action here in Washington State. Back in Washington DC, those who believe the nation should stand by idly while an epidemic of gun violence sweeps the nation have blocked all progress. We in the real Washington are better than that.

As long as I'm governor, Washington will be one of those states that says 'enough is enough.'

This is something we know will make a difference because it's the same public health approach we've taken with huge success to reduce motor vehicle fatalities.

In fact, firearms are a leading cause of death and injury, even more so than motor vehicles.

The public health approach to reducing motor vehicle deaths is working and that same approach can reduce gun-related deaths.

When we set out to reduce motor vehicle-related fatalities we looked at the data and determined we needed different strategies based on demographics and region. We saw that death and injuries were resulting from a variety of human and technological factors.

The result was a suite of strategies related to increased seatbelt use, DUI deterrence, law enforcement and improved vehicle design.

We will use this same approach to reduce firearm deaths and injuries, relying on a partnership with community-based organizations, faith communities, schools, health care providers and many others, to develop solutions.

The first step is data, and since Congress refuses to do it, we'll do it ourselves.

My executive order directs the state Department of Health with the Department of Social and Health Services and other state and local agencies, in collaboration with the University of Washington, to gather data on gun-related deaths and injury hospitalizations and make recommendations for prevention and safety strategies.

The next step is continuing to build on the successful background check system approved by Washingtonians in 2014.

Because of that system, over 5,300 background checks were conducted in 2015 that otherwise would likely not have been done.

I've directed the Office of Financial Management to analyze the effectiveness of information sharing between the courts, local jurisdictions, law enforcement, state agencies and others to

determine if there are gaps we can fill or improvements we can make in our system.

I'm requesting the Attorney General's office to analyze current enforcement practices against unlawful attempts to purchase firearms.

I've asked for these groups' recommendations to be submitted by October of this year.

And finally, to address the complex challenge of suicide, I'm directing the Department of Health to begin implementing the collaborative Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan.

Between 2012 and 2014, approximately 80 percent of the 665 firearm deaths were suicides. Having a gun in your home makes you more likely to successfully attempt suicide, and slightly more likely to be a victim of homicide.

No one should feel resigned to the fact that this sad reality is beyond our control.

Washingtonians have made it clear they want action.

My executive order today is intended as a first step in a long-term effort to reduce gun crime, suicide rates and firearm injuries.

Some say we can't do everything to stop all gun violence, so we should not do anything to stop any gun violence. That is just not common sense.

We refuse to think of ourselves in Washington as helpless victims of this scourge. Public safety is the top priority. So we are taking these important steps based more on common sense and less on ideology.

I don't mean to say this should be our exclusive approach. I know others have ideas that are worthy of consideration.

I also hope this approach encourages everyone to work together in fashioning a public health response to a public health problem.

This includes the thousands of people who are responsible gun owners here. None of them want their despondent teenager using their parents' guns to commit suicide. None of them want a criminal getting a gun and terrorizing the community. Responsible gun owners want to keep guns out of the hands of the wrong people, at the wrong time, for the wrong reason.

This doesn't need to be a divisive issue. With strong community collaboration and sensible policies and strategies, we can make a difference.

With that I'd like to turn to Dr. Vavilala, from Harborview Medical Center Injury Prevention and Research Center.