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House Panelists Ponder Range Of Gun Bills In Committee Hearing

Testimony spanned a wide range of topics from teenage suicide, to nullification, to unnecessary ultrasounds as the House State & Local Government Committee considered a series of gun-related legislation Tuesday.

The panel delved into proposals to both increase and decrease regulations on firearms, but Chairman [Rep. Terrence Blair](#) (R-Washington Twp.) said it was too soon to say whether the committee would take action on any of the bills.

"I'm not the kind of guy who prejudices things. I just thought that while we have all these gun bills in front of us it was good to keep everybody's focus on the same issue," he said in an interview. "I actually believe that there's positives to an open discussion of the matter of guns. I don't like it to be confrontational. I like it to be more sensible."

The bill that got the most discussion was [Rep. Bill Patmon](#)'s (D-Cleveland) proposal to require gun owners to keep their firearms locked up in homes where children could potentially access them ([HB 31](#)). Numerous witnesses testified in support of the bill.

Children's Defense Fund-Ohio Executive Director Renuka Mayadev said Ohio has received national attention "for our epidemic of losing children to accidental shootings."

Studies show that 22% of children in homes with guns have handled the firearms without their parents' knowledge, she said. "It is not surprising then that approximately 90% of fatal firearm incidents among youth occur as a result of the easy accessibility of loaded and unlocked guns in the home."

Twenty-seven states, including Florida and Texas, have already enacted child access prevention laws, she said.

[Rep. Ron Maag](#) (R-Lebanon) said many children have been taught to handle firearms and have successfully used them to defend themselves and their families at home. He asked what would happen if an intruder came into the house but a child couldn't access the gun because it was locked. "What you're saying with this legislation is that their lives are less valuable," he said.

Ms. Mayadev disagreed, saying policymakers should consider how often children successfully use guns to defend themselves versus how often they are misused.

Josie Setzler, of Fremont, said her niece tried to commit suicide by slashing her wrists, but was taken to the hospital which saved her life.

"I shudder to think what could have happened if an unsecured gun had been easily available to her. Thank goodness that was not the case," she said.

Many teen suicide attempts are impulsive and if a firearm is near at hand, the youth might follow through on the urge, she said.

Dr. Jonathan Groner, a pediatric trauma surgeon in Columbus, recalled a child who had been accidentally shot and killed by a friend when they were playing with a gun on Christmas Eve.

"In the two decades that I have worked in Columbus, this story has been repeated many times," he said.

Responding to questions from Rep. Maag, Dr. Groner said while some gun owners report home security as the reason they own a gun, most own firearms for recreational purposes.

Studies show that the risk of accidental shooting is three times higher in homes where guns are stored and the risk of suicide is five times higher than in homes without guns, he said. "While home invasions do occur, this is one of those odds games."

Rep. Maag questioned the accuracy of the studies and said he's seen others that refuting the claims. Dr. Groner said he has yet to see an article in a peer-reviewed journal that shows children successfully protect themselves at home with firearms.

Rep. Patmon noted that the bill only requires gun owners to secure their firearms. If someone wants their child to have access to it, "give them a key. This is not a complicated bill," he added.

Toby Hoover, founder and policy chair of the Ohio Coalition Against Gun Violence, said research shows that storing guns locked and unloaded reduces the risk of injuries and suicide by about 70%. More than 75% of the guns used in youth suicide attempts and unintentional injuries were stored in the residence of the victim, a relative or a friend, she said.

"Think of the lives that could be saved if a young person, whether from curiosity, poor judgment, anger, bullying, depression, or mental illness, doesn't have access to a gun in the house," Ms. Hoover said.

Rosie Craig testified on behalf of the League of Women Voters, said several local communities had local ordinances making it a misdemeanor offense when a gun fell into the hands of an unauthorized minor.

"These Ohio communities understood that children and guns don't mix and that our communities had a collective responsibility to keep children safe," she said. However, the General Assembly passed

concealed carry legislation in 2006 that removed municipalities ability to pass local gun ordinances, she recalled.

Amy Pulles, director of the Ohio Coalition Against Gun Violence, compared the measure to regulations that require child and booster seats in cars and child-proof lids on medications. "Guns can be just as deadly for a child as car accidents and overdosing on medication," she said. After hearing all the witnesses, Chairman Blair said he struggled with the issue of "trying to legislate some modicum of common sense among people. And to me owning a weapon has a responsibility, that responsibility is for me to safely store it.

"I only wish we could create a law and make people use common sense, but I don't think we can," he added.

House Bill 99: Several witnesses testified on a very different proposal ([HB 99](#)) that would prohibit law enforcement officials from seizing lawfully owned firearms in most circumstances and block federal and state officials from enforcing a ban or registration requirements not already in effect. Luke O'Dell, director of political affairs for the National Association of Gun Rights, called the measure "a solid step toward protecting the rights of law-abiding residents of Ohio from overreach by the federal government."

Anti-gun groups in Washington are working with the Obama administration to curb Second Amendment rights, he said, pointing to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' move to forward the names of more than 140,000 veterans to the National Instant Criminal Background System. "Simply put, the state of Ohio must not stand idly by and allow the tools of self-defense be stripped from its citizens at the whim of a government bureaucrat," he said.

Doug Deeken, director of Ohioans for Concealed Carry, said the measure would not hinder the legitimate need to seize firearms in investigations of criminal matters.

Prohibiting new gun registries "only makes good sense" because they are almost always precursors to confiscation, he said, noting that the bill would allow existing registries to continue, such as the federal machine gun registry. "As such, this is a modest and restrained provision of the bill." Erich Pratt, director of communications for Gun Owners of America, said the bill was consistent with the U.S. Constitution "and is definitely in line with nullification efforts in America's history."

"When the federal government begins to usurp the rights and freedoms of the American people, it's the states, which are duty-bound to step in and protect them from these abuses," he said in written testimony.

House Bill 137: Rep. Patmon offered very brief comments on his proposal to require universal criminal background checks for all gun sales ([HB 137](#)), which is similar to a bill ([HB 119](#)) sponsored by [Rep. Tracy Heard](#) (D-Columbus), who was not available to testify.

Rep. Maag asked if the sponsor expected someone who stole a gun to conduct a criminal background check before reselling it to another criminal.

Rep. Patmon said many people, who are not themselves criminals, purchase guns and then resell them to other people who are criminals.

[Rep. Marlene Anielski](#) (R-Independence) asked how much the legislation would cost legitimate firearms dealers.

Rep. Patmon said since legitimate dealers are already required to conduct background checks it wouldn't cost them anything.

House Bill 236: [Rep. John Becker](#) (R-Union Twp.) offered sponsor testimony on his proposal to allow state and local government employees with a concealed carry permit to bring firearms into non-federal government building that are not secured with a metal detector, prisons or police stations.

The legislation was inspired during a Goshen Township Board of Trustees meeting when a resident became "particularly and unusually agitated and animated," the sponsor said in written testimony. "I was sitting on the edge of my chair, prepared to jump up and tackle the guy if he were to lunge at the trustees or, perhaps, display a weapon," he said.

Rep. Becker recalled that a Pennsylvania man shot five people inside a municipal building last August during a township board of supervisors meeting. In 2010 a disgruntled man fired on a superintendent and school board members in Panama City, he said.

"I don't want to see that happen in Ohio. I don't want people to be helpless hostages because state law does not permit self-defense," he said.

"Nobody has to be a victim. When people are allowed to shoot back, lives are saved," Rep. Becker said. "My only objection to armed resource officers and metal detectors is that they cost money. And at some point you cross the line and start to resemble a fortress."

House Bill 222: [Rep. Robert Hagan](#) (D-Youngstown) and [Rep. Mike Foley](#) (D-Cleveland) submitted joint sponsor testimony on their proposal to require gun dealers provide information about the kinds of injuries that can result from use of a firearm ([HB 222](#) ).

The primary cosponsors said in written testimony that the bill was inspired by several Republican-sponsored abortion measures that the legislature passed earlier this year.

"Waiting periods, invasive and unnecessary ultrasounds, and required sharing of misinformation about the connection between abortions and breast cancer, or the biologically false claim that fetuses can feel pain before the third trimester are just some of the new requirements introduced," they said.

"If there are such extensive requirements for women, regardless of the myriad of reasons a woman has chosen to have this medical procedure, we thought there should be some factual information required to be shared when firearms, inherently violent instruments, are purchased," they said.