



**Senate Criminal Justice Committee
Senate Bill 1573 by Sen. Carol Alvarado
Testimony by Cedric Dark, MD
April 9, 2019**

Chair Whitmire, Vice Chair Huffman, and members of the committee, I am Dr. Cedric Dark, an emergency medicine physician from Houston here on behalf of both the Texas College of Emergency Physicians and the Texas Medical Association, representing nearly 53,000 physicians and medical students. We are pleased to express our support for Senate Bill 1573 by Sen. Carol Alvarado. Our testimony today addresses the importance of improving public awareness of firearm safety to prevent firearm accidents, and also of the growing need to take action on suicide prevention.

I have been a full-time emergency physician at a busy Level 1 trauma center in Senator Miles' district for the past six years. Let me share a brief story with you about how important this bill is.

Unfortunately, this story is not uncommon. The United States has the highest firearm homicide and firearm-related suicide rates of all high-income countries.¹

Texas had more firearm-related deaths – 3,353 – than any other state, a rate of 12.1 per 100,000 (2016).² Physicians are alarmed that suicide is now one of the **top 10 leading causes of death** in the United States and one of only four causes with significant rate increases. Half of the nation's 44,000 suicides in 2016, more than 22,000, were by firearm. Males consistently have the highest rates in all age groups (more than 80 percent of all firearm suicides), and the rates rise among older age groups. The U.S. suicide rate by firearm increased 21 percent from 2006 to 2016 (for people more than 10 years old). Like the rest of the country, Texas' suicide rate has increased; our suicide-by-firearm rate of 7.3 is higher than the U.S. rate of 6.5 (per 100,000).

Firearm mortality is the **second most common** cause of preventable death among U.S. children, and firearm homicide, suicide, and unintentional discharge are the major factors in both child injury and fatality. With an estimated 400 million firearms in this country, likely hundreds of thousands of homes have at least one firearm. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that most parents believe their children will not touch a firearm or do not know where firearms are kept or can be accessed in the home. But in 2015, 609 Texas children were injured or died by a firearm. More than 200 of these were deaths from a suicide, assault or homicide, accidental firearm discharge, or with an undetermined intent. More than half of these child deaths were homicides, and most deaths were in children aged 15-19 years.

Texas' requirements for the safe storage and security of a firearm are critical to support the prevention of theft or the misuse of firearms by adults and children. We know most parents with firearms in the home will talk to their children about firearm safety, but not all do this – increasing risk in the home and especially with both adults and children who are prone to make an impulsive decision. The public health data tell us that children who are with an untrained or otherwise careless adult or a friend with access to a firearm are most likely to be injured or killed in an unintentional discharge.

Keeping firearms away from people who present a risk of harm or who are unable to make sound decisions provides a strong base for managing firearm safety. But having strong state laws on firearm safety will not adequately ensure protection as long as the public is not aware of these requirements or of other measures to reduce firearm accidents and access to firearms for those at risk of harm to themselves. We believe Senator Alvarado's proposal to conduct a statewide campaign on firearm safety and suicide prevention can be an effective measure so the public knows how they can help prevent these injuries and deaths.

We recognize that about 40 percent of the U.S. adults own one or more firearms or live in a home where a firearm is present. In Texas, gun ownership is associated with an individual's personal freedom, and protection is a key reason why many own one or more firearms. Our members remain focused on proven prevention and harm reduction methods in all areas of public and population health. Physicians have a role in addressing gun violence and firearm safety. We are talking to our patients about safety measures in the home including the measures that will prevent firearm mortality and morbidity. We encourage you to take action to approve Senate Bill 1573, and we offer our assistance with implementation of this important legislation.

¹ Grinshteyn E & Hemenway D, Violent Death Rates: The U.S. Compared with Other High-income OECD Countries, 2010, *The American Journal of Medicine*; Richardson EG, Hemenway D, Homicide, suicide, and unintentional firearm fatality; comparing the United States with other high-income countries, *J. Trauma Injury, Infection, and Critical Care* 70: 238-43.

² Louisiana, Alabama, and Alaska had the highest rates of firearm mortality in the country in 2016 (21.3 to 23.3 per 100,000).