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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

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<http://help.senate.gov>

June 21, 2018

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
United States Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

Today is National Asking Saves Kids Day or National ASK Day – a day to promote gun safety and remind parents and caregivers of the critical importance of safely storing firearms, particularly to protect students, children, and young people from gun-related injuries and deaths resulting from unsecured firearms at home. We write to urge you to leverage the resources of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS or “Department”) to employ a prevention-focused public health approach to support, encourage, and foster greater safety and security of our students, children, and young people from gun violence in all of its forms. As many families around the country face the tragedy of gun violence, National ASK Day is a fitting time to consider what simple steps the Department can take to help save lives.

Death and injury by firearm continue to be among the most significant threats to youth in communities across our nation. Since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, over 210,000 students in more than 200 schools have experienced a shooting on campus, and more than 85 percent of the firearms brought to school and used in such incidents have come from home, from a parent or a close relative.¹ Street crime and school shootings pose major threats to young people; the threat posed by suicide and unintentional shootings among persons with access to firearms is even greater.² Tragically, on an average day, seven children and teens are killed by firearms, and approximately two-thirds of gun deaths in our nation are suicides.³

¹ Cox, John Woodrow, et al. “Analysis | More than 210,000 Students Have Experienced Gun Violence at School since Columbine.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 20 Apr. 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/local/school-shootings-database/?utm_term=.d1a233263b69. Updated 25 May 2018.

² Anglemyer, Andrew, et al. “The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization Among Household Members.” *Annals of Internal Medicine*, vol. 160, no. 2, 2014, pp. 101–110., doi:10.7326/m13-1301

³ “Gun Violence by the Numbers.” *EverytownResearch.org*, 14 Mar. 2018, everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/.

In October 2017, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report I requested assessing the efficacy of public health and safety programs designed to impact gun safety, including the storage and security of guns in households throughout the country. GAO found that many organizations agree that firearms should be properly stored to prevent access by unauthorized users, citing that “the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) both recommend that firearms be stored unloaded, locked, and separate from locked ammunition.” A recent study found that 4.6 million children live in a household with an unlocked and loaded firearm.⁴ Researchers have found that gun owners who practice safe storage are less likely to incur firearm-related injury or death by accidental and self-inflicted means; a study reported that in homes with children where firearms are kept, 55 percent had one or more firearms in an unlocked place, and 43 percent kept guns without a trigger lock in an unlocked place.⁵ The study also found over 25 percent of household guns are stored loaded, and half of these are not kept locked.

While there is much more to be done by Congress, your Department, and other Federal Agencies to combat gun violence, one of many steps the Trump Administration can take right now is to promote safe use and storage of firearms, in order to prevent unauthorized access and use by children, students, and young people. We urge you to take action now to develop a safe storage plan before the beginning of the 2018 – 2019 school year. In order to better understand how your Department intends to address this important issue, we also ask that you provide answers to the following questions by July 5, 2018:

- (1) What HHS programs and initiatives address gun safety and safe storage of firearms, including efforts to expand the scope of ongoing outreach and education to parents, caregivers, medical, psychological and public health professionals, and other stakeholders?
- (2) The 2017 GAO report found that programs that focus on teaching children, students, or young people what to do if they encounter a firearm, as opposed to actually addressing safe storage, are ineffective in protecting young people from gun-related injuries and deaths.
 - a. Does the Department currently support any such programs?
 - b. Does the Department currently support any evidence-based, public health oriented gun safety programs, including those that focus on improving the safe storage and safe use of firearms by adult gun owners? If not, why not?
- (3) As a member of President Trump’s Federal Commission on School Safety, you are one of the federal government’s leaders in developing policies to keep students safe in schools. To that end, what steps is the Commission considering to encourage safe storage of firearms? If the Commission is considering no such action, why is that the case?

⁴ Azrael, Deborah, et al. “Firearm Storage in Gun-Ownning Households with Children: Results of a 2015 National Survey.” *Journal of Urban Health*, vol. 95, no. 3, 2018, pp. 295–304., doi:10.1007/s11524-018-0261-7.

⁵ Mark A. Schuster et al., Firearm Storage Patterns in U.S. Homes with Children, 90 *Am. J. Pub. Health* 588, 590 (Apr. 2000).

We appreciate your attention to this critical matter. If you have any questions, or would like to further discuss compliance with this request, please contact Andi Lipstein Fristedt with my Health, Education, Labor, and Pension Committee staff at (202) 224-7675.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patty Murray". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long, sweeping underline.

Patty Murray
Ranking Member