



December 2, 2019

The Ohio Senate
Government Oversight & Reform Committee
1 Capitol Square
Columbus, OH 43215

Dear Chair Coley, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Ohio Mayors Alliance, a bipartisan coalition of mayors in Ohio's largest cities, we write to you today to express our support for Senate Bill 221, known as STRONG Ohio.

Since forming in 2016, we have been vocal, bipartisan advocates on a variety of state legislative issues. Up to this point, however, gun violence prevention had not been one those. That all changed on the morning of Aug. 4, 2019, when a gunman opened fire in Dayton's Oregon District, killing nine people and wounding dozens more in under a minute.

This was the second mass shooting in one of our cities. In September 2018, a gunman opened fire in the lobby of an office building in downtown Cincinnati killing four and again wounding many others. The committee previously heard from one victim of this shooting, Whitney Strong, who was shot 12 times and miraculously survived. Her story is a powerful reminder of how earthshattering gun violence can be.

The senselessness and tragedy of mass shootings is hard to comprehend. But as mayors, we see the impact of gun violence firsthand and far too often. We have grieved with family members and comforted our neighbors during unthinkable moments of despair. We've also seen the toll that gun violence takes on our law enforcement officers nearly every day.

From 2009 through 2018, there were 13,001 gun-related deaths in Ohio, according to the Ohio Alliance for Innovation in Population Health. That's an average of 1,445 gun deaths a year and an average of over three gun deaths a day. Ohio's gun-death rate per 100,000 people is slightly higher than the national average, which is the 11th highest in the world. We have a lower gun death-rate than Honduras and El Salvador, but a higher rate than countries such as the Philippines, Mexico, and Nicaragua.

Again, according to the Ohio Alliance for Innovation in Population Health, Ohio's urban counties, experience a disproportionate amount of gun homicides and thus a higher gun-death rate per 100,000 people. In our urban counties such as Hamilton, Franklin and Trumbull we see an average death rate of

about 14 people per 100,000, while Montgomery and Mahoning counties average about 15 deaths per 100,000.

However, this isn't just an urban county problem. Many rural Ohio counties also experience high rates of gun deaths. This is because of the abnormally high rates of suicide by gun, which pushes the average rate of gun-deaths per 100,000 in many rural counties up to 18 to 20 deaths a year.

Our coalition includes mayors from large and small counties alike. We are both Democrats and Republicans. Some of us have different views about guns and how broadly the second amendment should be interpreted, but we all agree: it is time to do something.

The STRONG Ohio legislation (SB 221) makes meaningful changes to the status quo that will help keep our communities safe. Specifically, it does three things: 1) it creates a new mechanism to get dangerous weapons out of the hands of potentially dangerous people; 2) it enhances Ohio's gun-purchasing background check system; and 3) it provides discretionary authority to judges to help get the small number of repeat offenders off the streets if they use or possess a weapon while committing a felony.

The Ohio Mayors Alliance believes that these enhanced discretionary penalties must clearly be limited to either a previous violent felony or a new violent offense with a previous felony. We believe that an amendment clarifying this point is necessary.

We know there are some that would like to see the background check reforms go further. But we also recognize that this proposal will make needed changes both with reforms to the current system and the changes being proposed for non-licensed sellers.

The fact that someone with an open arrest warrant could walk into a federally licensed dealer and more than likely pass a background check and buy a gun is a serious problem. The changes proposed in SB 221 will address this.

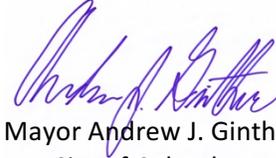
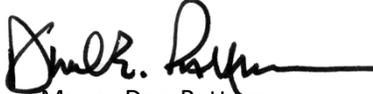
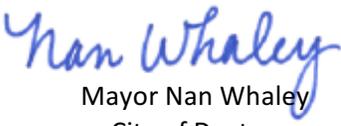
The fact that there is virtually no way to curb the illegal sales of guns through non-licensed dealers is a serious problem. SB 221 will go a long way to address this by creating a mechanism to get a private-sale background check. It also establishes much stiffer penalties (from just 18 months in prison to 3 years) for sellers who sell guns to someone who is legally prohibited from owning one. It also enhances criminal penalties for those found guilty of negligently selling a firearm by increasing the charge from a felony of the fourth degree (F4) to a felony of the third degree (F3). This is very important and we strongly encourage the legislature to maintain this proposed change.

We recognize that there are very different opinions about this bill on both sides of the aisle, both within our coalition of mayors and the members of the General Assembly. We also recognize that there are many possible ways to help reduce gun violence across that state. We are supporting this bill because we believe it can become law and if it does, it will help make our communities safer and save lives.

Lastly, we appreciate the leadership of Gov. Mike DeWine and Lt. Gov. Jon Husted. We also appreciate the work of the legislative leaders, bill sponsor Sen. Matt Dolan and the co-sponsors: Sen. Peggy Lehner and Sen. Frank Hogland. Finding meaningful solutions to a complicated, deeply divisive issue is not easy. That is why we greatly appreciate the efforts that these leaders have put forth and for the work that all of you are doing to address the very serious challenge of gun violence in our communities and our state.

Respectfully submitted,

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