

**Proponent Testimony for SB273**  
**House Public Safety Committee**  
**Whitney Austin, Executive Director & Founder, Whitney/Strong Foundation**  
**March 3, 2026**

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the House Public Safety Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Whitney Austin, and I am here as a proponent of SB 273.

My life changed on the morning of September 6, 2018. As a corporate employee at Fifth Third Bank, I arrived for work at our headquarters on Fountain Square in Cincinnati as I always did. Only this time, as I stepped into the revolving door, I was met by a mass shooter and a barrage of bullets. The shooter had no connection to the bank or any of his victims. He was severely mentally ill and intent on causing harm.

He succeeded.

Three people were killed, each one the center of an entire world of loved ones. I was one of two wounded survivors. Although you cannot see it today, I was struck by twelve bullets from a poorly maintained Taurus 9mm. It is a miracle that I am here at all, and I owe my life to the quick action of Cincinnati Police officers and the exceptional medical team at University Hospital.

Very few people can relate to what I experienced. While the trauma of that day will stay with me forever, something stronger emerged from it: a profound calling. I felt an overwhelming responsibility to use my survival for good. To help others avoid gun death and injury – incidents that upend families and communities. That mission led me to create Whitney/Strong; an organization focused on common-ground, data-driven solutions that save lives.

As a former banker, I naturally began with data, specifically, how gun deaths occur in Ohio. In 2023, Ohio lost 1,768 people to firearm deaths, which is about one person every five hours. Our firearm death rate is 7% higher than the national average.

Early on, I was surprised to learn that **suicide is the leading category of gun death in the state.**<sup>1</sup> In 2023, 59% of Ohio's firearm deaths were suicides. Another trend stood out: some of the highest firearm death rates now occur in small rural and mid-sized counties, driven largely by firearm suicide. Brown, Jefferson, Mahoning, and Richland all rank among the highest in the state.

And while overall suicide rates in Ohio have declined 1.9% since 2019, firearm suicide rates have risen 4.8%, climbing back toward pre-pandemic levels.

Certain groups are especially affected. Firearms are now the leading cause of injury death for Ohioans ages 1–17.<sup>2</sup> Youth firearm suicides have risen 28% over the past decade.<sup>3</sup> Veterans face even more

sobering numbers: in 2022, 77% of Ohio veterans who died by suicide used a firearm, compared with 56% of the general population. Overall, Ohio veterans die by suicide at nearly twice the rate of non-veterans.

Firearm suicide affects every part of the state, and each life lost leaves behind people whose worlds are shattered.

As I tried to understand more about suicide, I learned several critical facts. Suicidal crises are often brief and impulsive. The time from thought to action is frequently under ten minutes.<sup>4</sup> More than 90% of firearm suicide attempts end in death, compared to about 3% of medication overdoses.<sup>5</sup> And one of the most powerful protective factors is simple: **put time and distance between a person in crisis and a firearm.**<sup>6</sup>

I also learned there is nothing simple about the reasons a person becomes suicidal. The circumstances are personal, complex, and vary widely. That is why prevention includes both recognizing the signs and knowing how to respond. Trainings like Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) can help equip people to engage with someone who may be struggling. Though even with these tools it is extremely challenging to predict who will attempt suicide, even for seasoned health practitioners.<sup>7</sup> But no matter the situation, one element is clear: **when someone is experiencing suicidal thoughts, temporarily limiting their access to firearms can save their life.**

This is known as lethal means safety. Lethal means safety refers to voluntary actions that promote safety while respecting firearm owners' values and choices. They can take many forms:

- A friend storing a gun when a veteran's PTSD becomes overwhelming
- A parent securing a firearm when a teen is going through a difficult season
- Adult children holding a parent's gun during a depressive episode

Today, we are here to discuss another form in SB 273 – the option for the voluntary transfer of firearms to gun shops or law enforcement when in crisis.

Voluntary temporary transfer offers a way to prevent injury while supporting firearm owners' commitment to safety and personal responsibility. Research is still emerging on this form, but we do know a few things. Gun shops and law enforcement support suicide prevention, but often hesitate to offer voluntary storage because of uncertainty or fear around liability, especially concerning the return of a firearm.<sup>8-10</sup> Many states lack clear procedures for how and when a gun should be returned, and that uncertainty alone can discourage participation.<sup>11</sup>

SB 273 addresses these barriers by offering clear guidance and good-faith liability protection, while still allowing action against malicious withholding. Making the process straightforward is also key; voluntary temporary transfers offer a non-court, non-punitive path that can be used early, long before a crisis escalates, and while someone seeks help.

None of us want Ohioans to reach a point where they consider suicide. Yet when they do, having options that create time and distance can mean the difference between life and death. Imagine if you will, a father who is struggling with a suicidal crisis. Instead of gaining immediate access to his firearm from the safe beside his bed, he must take the additional steps to grab his keys, get into his car, drive to the gun shop, walk into the business filled with employees and customers, and retrieve his firearm. Each step takes him further away from his initial thoughts of suicide and closer to a future where he is here to be the center of an entire world of loved ones.

As a survivor and suicide prevention advocate, I urge you to support SB 273. Thank you to Senator Koehler for his leadership and the Senate for its unanimous passage of this legislation. Thank you for your time and for your commitment to considering solutions that can save lives. I look forward to working together to ensure this process remains simple, accessible, and widely understood across Ohio. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

**Thank you,**

**Whitney Austin**

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