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Public Health Approach Can Help Curb Gun Deaths

By Nina Vinik

Last month at Virginia Tech, Seung-Hui Cho, a college student with a history of mental illness, shot and killed 32 people and himself, using semiautomatic handguns equipped with one or more large-capacity magazines.

As a nation, and as families and individuals, we struggle to understand how tragedies like this can happen. Its time we also ask how tragedies like this can be prevented.

High-profile incidents like Virginia Tech represent only a fraction of the daily toll inflicted by guns. Every day in America, 32 people lose their lives in gun homicides and another 48 people die in unintentional shootings and suicides. Gun violence is an epidemic in our nation and Illinois is no exception. From 1999 to 2004, guns killed 6,999 Illinois residents, 1,039 of whom were children and youth.

In just the last week, four separate shootings occurred in Springfield within a 24-hour period, leaving one victim seriously wounded. In Joliet, a 15-year-old boy was shot, possibly as gang retaliation for the shooting of another young man only days before. In Chicago, residents are mourning the deaths of 16-year-old Blair Holt, who was shot trying to save a friend's life on a city bus, and 23-year-old Tramaine Gibson, a husband and father who was shot during a South Side bank robbery while working as a teller. Sadly, last week was not unique.

These deaths underscore the need for common-sense gun regulations that can help curb gun deaths and injuries. Several bills are currently being considered that would address the lethality and accessibility of guns. Senate Bill 1007 will ban large-capacity ammunition magazines (defined as those that hold more than 10 rounds of ammunition), which enable the user to fire many times without reloading and then to reload very quickly. At Virginia Tech, Cho was able to fire off more than 170 rounds in just nine minutes.

Another important bill, SB 940, will close background check loopholes so that prohibited purchasers with mental health disorders are not able to buy guns. To stem the flow of illegal gun trafficking, House Bill 758 will require criminal background checks for all handgun transfers, and HB 1696 will require gun owners to report to law enforcement when their guns are lost or stolen.

Statewide, these policies are supported by the Illinois Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (www.icpgv.org), which includes law enforcement officials, medical and health professionals, faith-based organizations, victim advocates and state and local policy-

makers. The campaign advocates for meaningful gun policy reform to reduce preventable gun crime and violence.

According to a bipartisan survey released by the campaign in March, an overwhelming majority of Illinois voters supports these and other common-sense policies to reduce gun crime and violence. Ninety-six percent of voters support requiring gun owners to report lost or stolen firearms to law enforcement and 89 percent support requiring background checks on all private handgun transactions. Citizens across Illinois understand that reasonable regulations on gun ownership are for the safety and common good of our society as a whole.

It's appropriate to ask whether these laws will make a difference. Auto safety offers an instructive example: As recently as the 1950s, traffic fatalities were thought to be unavoidable. Instead, through a series of policies and other actions, including requiring seat belts, building safer cars and roads, and increasing penalties for drunken driving, motor vehicle fatalities in the United States have decreased by 80 percent per mile driven since the 1950s.

This public health approach also can work to reduce gun deaths and injuries. The laws being considered in Springfield will help reduce the lethality, accessibility and the sheer number of illegal guns on our streets. It will not happen overnight, but just as with regulations on cars and driving, we can reduce the number of gun deaths.

For many years the conventional wisdom in Springfield has been that supporting gun control might compromise election prospects. The facts are that the vast majority of voters are supportive of reasonable gun regulations, including NRA members, FOID card holders and hunters.

Our polling demonstrates that nearly 9 in 10 voters say that a candidate's position on these issues is important to them in how they vote on Election Day. The small, vocal minority represented by the gun lobby does not speak for the voters. Its time for our elected officials in Springfield to stand up to the gun lobby and support these reasonable policies to help prevent gun violence and save lives - for the good of everyone in Illinois.

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