

Remarks: Representative T. J. Rooney

House Judiciary Committee Hearing

Personalized Handguns (H.B. 1484)

Firearm Ban in Municipal Buildings (H.B. 1793)

July 15, 1998

I would like to first thank Chairman Gannon for demonstrating the courage to convene a frank and open discussion on issues relating to firearms and for allowing the Committee the opportunity to hear testimony on two bills I have introduced that are intended to help reduce the number of tragic accidental and intentional death and injuries by firearms.

I believe, as all of you do, that now more than ever we must be about the business of considering remedies to the very serious issues surrounding the senseless and needless tragedy resulting from the misuse of firearms. Your presence here today indicates the time has come in Pennsylvania to begin the process of change.

It was my intention today to talk at length about the content of two bills I have introduced, one which requires gun manufacturers to personalize handguns so that only the owner or owners can use it and one which bans firearms from being brought into municipal buildings.

However, I was contacted yesterday by Mayor Rendell, who as you know is very interested in these issues and other gun-related measures, and he expressed an interest in participating in future hearings.

Chairman Gannon was kind enough to grant him this so I will postpone my extended remarks to a time in the near future when we reconvene to talk about the specifics of this legislation.

Additionally, I have been working closely with the group founded by Jim and Sarah Brady. I will provide members of the Committee with a letter I received yesterday from Mrs. Brady relating to legislation I have sponsored. It is my understanding that Mr. or Mrs. Brady or a member of their organization would also appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee when we reconvene.

Today, I would like to point out that I, like everyone else, recognize the escalating problem of youth violence and the misuse of firearms isn't a mess we got into overnight and it is not a mess we will get out of overnight.

Not any one piece of legislation or even the implementation of a larger package of legislation can completely solve this dilemma.

But, we do know that violence is viewed as a learned behavior and it is assumed to be preventable. There are social and psychological causes, identifiable risk factors and patterns of occurrence that we can narrow down and attack.

So at the same time we are working on enacting laws that are tough on crime and that seek to make offenders pay for their actions, we should also be focusing on the ideal goal – which is to prevent people – especially our children and teenagers – from committing crimes in the first place.

I recognize that prevention is a difficult task and that there are no easy answers about how to spot those individuals who are likely to commit an act of violence or another crime and how to stop it.

Factors leading to violence include, but are not limited to, poverty, dysfunctional families, prejudice and discrimination, a lack of good jobs, the assault on self-esteem and self-confidence and the easy access to guns, drugs and alcohol.

Whenever we can, though, we should be considering and approving legislation that addresses these risk factors and that makes good, common sense. We should be charging forward with legislation, for instance, that makes parents and other gun owners more accountable for their weapons by using trigger locks or storing their guns in a place where children and teenagers can't get their hands on them.

*--Except from Sarah Brady letter --*

In all of the tragedies that occurred earlier this spring and summer – in Edinboro, PA; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; West Paducah, KY and Pearl, Mississippi – these youngsters' access to firearms was simply too easy.

We also need to move forward on addressing the problems of at-risk children and disruptive students. We need to improve services to poor families and provide better opportunities for their children.

But, not all of the blame and responsibility for these problems should rest on government's shoulders. As we consider these two bills before the committee today and look at the myriad other proposals, I think it's important to remember that many problems can be best solved or addressed by families.

We should, as a Legislature, do what we can to provide safer schools, homes and streets, but we must also look to our communities, to our parents, our neighbors and friends to be more responsive to these serious problems.

So, I look forward to embarking on a discussion that will lead us in that direction and in considering the merits and disadvantages of my legislation and other proposals.

I'd like to thank the Committee and Chairman Gannon for your time and accept any questions the Committee might have at this point.