



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
Office of the Governor

Ralph S. Northam
Governor

August 19, 2019

Virginia State Crime Commission
Attn: Written Comments
1111 East Broad Street, Ste. B036
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Members of the Crime Commission:

On June 4, five days after a horrific mass shooting took twelve innocent lives and injured four more in Virginia Beach, I called a Special Session of the General Assembly to address the emergency of gun violence in our Commonwealth. I called this session because we in Virginia are all too familiar with the horror of mass shootings—I never want another governor to have to mourn with the families of innocent people killed at their workplace or their school. But we also know it is more than just mass shootings; the daily toll of gun violence in our communities kills more than 1,000 Virginians each year. That's an average of three people killed by guns every single day.

Virginians deserve action—and that is what I asked for when the General Assembly convened on July 9. Instead, legislators chose to adjourn ninety minutes after convening without hearing or debating a single bill, referring everything to the Crime Commission for further study. In the weeks days since, we have watched as gun violence continues to upend communities across our Commonwealth and nation.

The legislative package I put forward during the Special Session included commonsense proposals that will undoubtedly save lives. In fact, they are so common sense that even the President of the United States and other Republican leaders recently announced their support for some of these proposals, including background checks and an Extreme Risk Protective Order. While I reject the assertion that these bills need further study, I am confident that the presentations you all will hear on August 19 and 20 will only underscore the importance of implementing these measures.

Data show these measures are not only common sense and bipartisan—they are effective. An Extreme Risk Protective Order, now adopted in 17 states and Washington, D.C., has been shown to significantly reduce suicide deaths by firearms. Virginia's One Handgun a Month law dramatically reduced the number of crime guns from Virginia recovered in the Northeast, a total

drop of 54 percent. Since the repeal of this law in 2012, Virginia has returned to being the top source state for crime guns recovered in D.C., Maryland, New York, and West Virginia. And we know that background checks work: In 2018, nearly 2,000 prohibited persons were prevented from purchasing firearms from a federally licensed dealer in Virginia. Many more prohibited persons continue to purchase guns—without background checks—each and every day through private sales.

These proposals do not need further study. In fact, some of these measures were first recommended after the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007. The Virginia Tech report called for changes to higher education and mental health policies; importantly, the report also urged lawmakers to take direct action on gun violence through expanded background checks. While many of the mental health recommendations were embraced and adopted by the General Assembly, lawmakers ignored recommendations on gun violence. The assertion that more study is needed—twelve years and over 70 mass shootings after Virginia Tech—is inaccurate and inexcusable.

Furthermore, it is wrong to continue perpetuating the false idea that mental illness is solely to blame for gun violence. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that people experiencing mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators. I refuse to allow many politicians and the gun lobby to scapegoat some of our most vulnerable citizens as an excuse for their inaction.

As you continue your work on this important issue, I hope each of you will join me in rejecting baseless claims, stereotypes, and excuses. Commonsense gun safety legislation has already saved lives, where implemented. It is past time to save lives in Virginia.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ralph S. Northam". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Ralph S. Northam
Governor of Virginia