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U.S. SENATOR FOR MAINE

Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins
Bipartisan Safer Communities Act
June 23, 2022

I rise today in strong support of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.

Once again, our nation has been horrified by mass shootings, this time of shoppers killed in Buffalo, New York, and of schoolchildren and teachers murdered in Texas. Twelve of us have come together to develop the bipartisan proposal before us to help address the gun violence that is plaguing our country. We were led by Senators Chris Murphy, John Cornyn, Kyrsten Sinema, and Thom Tillis. And I want to thank and recognize each of them for their efforts.

Our commonsense plan increases needed mental health resources, improves school safety and support for students, and helps ensure that dangerous criminals and those who are adjudicated as suffering from mental illness cannot purchase firearms. If enacted, our bill will save lives. At the same time, it steadfastly protects the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding gun owners. It is not hyperbole to say that this legislation represents the most significant gun safety legislation in decades.

I would like to highlight two specific provisions of this bill that I worked on and that will have a significant impact in Maine and across the country.

First, our bill will fund crisis intervention programs like Maine's yellow flag law, which our state Supreme Court just upheld as constitutional this very week. Maine's law, which has robust due process protections, allows a court—following an assessment by a medical professional—to determine if individuals should temporarily lose possession of firearms because they pose a serious threat to themselves or to others. Maine's law was developed in consultation with the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, and it has likely saved lives. This federal legislation will provide Maine with more resources to fully implement this important program. It will help connect law enforcement, medical professionals, and people in crisis through telehealth services, as well as provide additional financial help to ensure that the law can be efficiently and effectively utilized when necessary.

Second, our bill will also help keep guns out of the hands of dangerous criminals. The bipartisan package includes the Stop Illegal Trafficking in Firearms Act that I co-authored with Senator Patrick Leahy. It cracks down on straw purchasing and firearms trafficking. I would like particularly to thank Senator Heinrich with whom I worked to further refine this proposal so that it could be included in this bipartisan package. Senator Heinrich was a wonderful partner as we worked through all of the details of this provision.

The trafficking of firearms to violent criminals, gangs, and drug trafficking groups presents a serious threat to public safety in communities across America. Straw purchasers—individuals who purchase guns for other people who are prohibited by law from receiving such weapons—are the linchpin of most firearms trafficking operations, which are responsible for funneling firearms into our cities and across our Southern border. Currently, there is no criminal statute specifically prohibiting straw purchasing or firearms trafficking in the way that we need it to do. Instead, prosecutors rely primarily on “paperwork violations” that prohibit making false statements in connection with the purchase of a firearm.

Our bill establishes new, specific criminal offenses with significant penalties for straw purchasers and firearms traffickers, along with enhanced penalties when straw-purchased firearms are used in connection with serious criminal activity like terrorism or drug trafficking.

The danger presented by straw purchasers and firearms trafficking is not abstract. It’s not theoretical. It’s very real—a real and present danger. Maine’s U.S. Attorney, Darcie McElwee, recently described how gun and drug trafficking in our state and elsewhere are often intertwined. “Individuals would come to Maine for guns and leave us their drugs and go back,” she explained. She added that, in recent years, guns acquired in Maine represented “7% of Massachusetts gun recoveries at crime scenes,” while Massachusetts guns “were responsible for 20% of ours. So, that means that both their guns and their drugs are coming into our state.”

In a recent example of gun and drug trafficking along the I-95 pipeline, a Massachusetts man was sentenced to seven years in prison after receiving two pistols from a straw purchaser in Androscoggin County while facilitating fentanyl sales in Bangor. What we’ve seen are gang members from Connecticut coming to Maine with heroin and swapping heroin for guns.

Gun trafficking is also a border security issue. Law enforcement has long been concerned about the flow of firearms from the United States into Mexico. According to a recent report, more than 70 percent of all crime guns recovered and traced in Mexico between 2009 and 2014—and that represents more than 73,000 firearms—were traced back to the United States. And the Mexican government has estimated that 200,000 firearms are smuggled from the United States into Mexico each year.

Our bill provides additional tools to law enforcement and prosecutors to prevent and prosecute these crimes. This is meaningful legislation that reflects input from gun safety advocates, gun rights groups, the U.S. Department of Justice, law enforcement officers, and others. Thus, in addition to helping keep our schools safe and our communities safe, this bill will help address the gun violence and drug problems that are plaguing our communities more generally.

I come from a state with a strong heritage of responsible gun ownership. This package reflects conversations that I have had with the Sportsman’s Alliance of Maine, the National Shooting Sports Foundation, and other responsible groups.

It is worth my emphasizing one more time that we are able to make these significant improvements without infringing on the rights of law-abiding gun owners.

Finally, it is important to note that this package demonstrates that members of the Senate can come together and work in a constructive way to get important goals achieved on behalf of the American people.

I urge my Senate colleagues to join me in supporting this bill.