

April 20, 2010

Dear Member of Congress:

On April 20, 1999, twelve students and one teacher were shot to death at Columbine High School. All four of the guns used at Columbine were purchased through a gap in federal law, known as the "gun show loophole," that allows criminals to buy guns at gun shows without background checks or a waiting period. As faith organizations representing millions of United States' citizens, we strongly urge you to close the so-called "gun show loophole" through passage of H.R.2324/S.843. These bills have been introduced by Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Representative Mike Castle (R-DE).

The term "gun show loophole" is often used to describe the gap in federal law that permits private sellers, who often congregate at gun shows, to sell guns without background checks or recordkeeping. Closing this loophole will help bring an end to one of the most painful chapters in the history of American gun violence. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), 30 percent of the firearms recovered in violent crimes – including those committed in our schools and on our streets – are connected to gun shows. This legislation will require background checks on all firearm sales at these shows, cutting off the easy and unfettered access to firearms by those who wish to do harm.

As a nation, we have not yet learned the lessons of the Columbine High School shootings and other deadly massacres. All four guns used by the Columbine shooters on April 20, 1999 were purchased at gun shows from private sellers who were not required to conduct background checks. These guns claimed the lives of one teacher and twelve students, while injuring twenty-three other students. Robyn Anderson, the young woman persuaded by the shooters to buy their guns for them, later told a state legislative committee: "I wish it would have been more difficult. I wouldn't have helped them buy the guns if I had faced a criminal background check." This extraordinary indictment of the gun show loophole continues to fall on deaf ears in Congress. The continued and unnecessary loss of life makes this issue a moral imperative for Congress to address.

Since the shootings at Columbine, the gun show loophole has repeatedly contributed to violence in this country. Just this month, John Bedell – who was prohibited by law from possessing guns – shot two Pentagon police officers with a gun purchased from a private seller at a Las Vegas gun show. Gun shows have also been linked to the violence on the U.S.-Mexico border and to terrorist plots.

It's no accident that gun shows are a major source of crime guns. The failure to mandate checks on all firearm sales at gun shows has apparently fostered a culture of disdain for the law. In 2009, an undercover investigation by the City of New York at seven gun shows exposed brash disregard for the law by private sellers and licensed sellers alike. Investigators found that 19 of out of 30 private sellers appeared to violate federal law by selling guns to individuals who told the sellers they "couldn't pass a background check,"

and 16 out of 17 licensed dealers sold illegally to investigators posing as “straw purchasers,” or individuals who purchase guns on behalf of a prohibited buyer.

In short, there is overwhelming evidence that crime guns proliferate as a consequence of the gun show loophole. The loophole undermines our federal background check process, and it fuels the trafficking of illegal guns across state borders – in particular, from states with an open gun show loophole to states that have already mandated checks on private sales at these shows. We can never hope to curb the high rates of illegal gun violence without federal action to close the loophole nationwide.

As people of faith we believe in the necessity of accountability and responsibility. Failure to close the gun show loophole allows irresponsibility to take precedence over appropriate standards of accountability that all people can accept. Therefore, we urge Congress to act quickly to pass H.R.2324/S.843 so that the sacredness of life can be sustained. Our children and our families deserve to be free from gun violence. Closing this loophole can make a substantial difference.

Sincerely,

American Friends Service Committee

Disciples Justice Action Network

The Episcopal Church

Friends Committee on National Legislation

Mennonite Central Committee, Washington Office

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Council of the Churches of Christ, in the U.S.A.

National Council of Jewish Women

NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Washington Office

Union for Reform Judaism

Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society