

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,
In Support of Commonsense Gun Safety Amendments
June 20, 2016**

A few days after the mass shooting in Orlando, I received a powerful letter from Ella Staats, a young Vermonter who, like Americans across our land, was sickened and horrified by this senseless act of hatred. Ella is 15. In her letter addressed to me, under the auspices of the Young Writers Project, she explained that even at her young age, she has “already seen so many mass shootings that it is becoming harder and harder to faze [her].” Ella calls on Congress to act, writing: “It is time that the gun laws in our country were completely reformed” so that these violent, hateful acts will be prevented. After reading her eloquent letter, I started drafting a response with all the votes that I had taken over the years. I started looking up all the hearings I had convened on gun violence and all the bills I had authored, cosponsored, and moved through the Judiciary Committee. But then I stopped, and I decided to respond to Ella here on the Senate floor, because Ella has given voice to something urgent that many people in Vermont and across the country are feeling right now. Here is my reply to Ella:

Dear Ella, thank you for your thoughtful letter. I have read it several times and I want you to know how powerful it is to speak up about issues as important as this one. Some worry that many of your generation have disengaged from involvement in the big issues of our day, but your letter gave me hope. You are right. It is long past time for Congress to reform the laws that allow mass gun violence to flourish in our country. You deserve to feel safe. You should not have to fear that guns designed for the battlefield will end up in the hands of terrorists or violent criminals. A large majority of our fellow Americans feel just as we do and support sensible answers. But your government has let you down. Time and time and time again, commonsense remedies are thwarted by obstruction and inertia. And only if more people like you stand up will we be able to change this.

Ella, I want you to know that I have been working for years to find practical solutions that will stop the gun violence that continues to touch every corner of our country. But I bet that the last thing you want is a list of all the bills I have written or voted for but have not passed. You want to know how we are going to overcome the well-funded opposition to passage of laws that will reduce gun violence. First, we must remember the amazing men, women and children who die from gun violence every day. Sadly these tragedies are not limited to mass shootings. It is essential that we pay attention to the loss that thousands of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters feel each day because of a shooting that could have been prevented. Second, we need new voices like yours. We need you to hold us accountable. We need more people to demand reform so that we can finally overcome the well-funded opposition to commonsense laws that would keep guns out of the hands of criminals and terrorists. Ella, I share your frustrations and I beg you *not* to become numb to this hatred and violence. I urge you to speak out in your community, on social media and to demand accountability. It often takes time – too long a time – but speaking out, sharing your ideas and views, and contacting your elected representatives makes a difference. I hope the votes that I cast on your behalf tonight demonstrate that I hear

you and I agree that we must act to prevent the next Orlando. Ella, thank you for doing that – for speaking out and for holding us accountable.

I ask unanimous consent that Ella's full letter be included in the Record.

Like Ella, Marcelle and I continue to mourn the deaths of 49 innocent people in Orlando just over a week ago. Just a year ago we were mourning the loss of 9 parishioners who were murdered in their church by a hateful domestic terrorist. It is unacceptable that hundreds more have died as a result of mass shootings since that tragic day in Charleston. This includes the victims killed at military facilities in Tennessee, a college in Oregon, a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado, an office gathering in San Bernardino, and dozens of other communities around the country.

Enough is enough. Ella is rightfully tired of excuses – and so am I. We cannot accept that daily shootings are the new normal. I was proud to join Senator Murphy, Senator Booker, Senator Blumenthal, and others here on the Senate floor last Wednesday in a call to action, and I commend those Senators for their determined leadership last week. We have to do something. Congress must act.

When Democrats were last in the majority in the Senate, I was Chairman of the Judiciary Committee last Congress and we took action. We convened hearings, debated and reported out sensible legislation to punish criminals who traffic in firearms, to close loopholes that allow criminals to acquire guns, and other measures to prevent mass shootings. We had broad support from the public and a bipartisan group of Senators. But Senate Republicans blocked every single one of these responsible proposals. And since re-taking control of the Senate, Republicans have stood in the way of even the most modest reforms. There have been no hearings and there was no willingness to allow votes on any gun violence legislation until Democrats took a stand.

Because last week Democrats demanded action on this issue, tonight we will have four votes and Americans across the country will know where each Senator stands. I am a responsible and proud gun owner, and most Vermonters know we should do everything we can to keep guns out of the hands of suspected terrorists. In order to do that we must close a loophole that allows suspected terrorists to pass the background checks conducted at gun stores. Senator Feinstein's amendment would give law enforcement the *discretion* to actually stop the sale of a gun to a known or suspected terrorist who presents a public safety threat. Had Senator Feinstein's amendment been law when the Orlando shooter attempted to purchase his assault weapon, the FBI would have had notice of what he was doing and could have prevented the tragedy in Orlando. The Department of Justice, which includes the FBI, supports Senator Feinstein's amendment. And I support Senator Feinstein's common sense amendment.

But closing the so-called "terror gap" is not enough. If a potential terrorist is barred from buying a gun at a local store, we have to ensure that he cannot just buy the same gun online without any sort of background check. If background checks are not universal, then what is the point? Senator Murphy's amendment closes a major loophole by requiring background checks for every firearm sale, including gun show and Internet sales – with reasonable exceptions including transfers to close family members.

The amendments offered by Senators Feinstein and Murphy are sensible approaches that will help stop the gun violence that is plaguing our Nation. In contrast, the alternatives offered by Senators Cornyn and Grassley do not adequately address the problems we face – and in some respects they make things worse. The Cornyn amendment would impose impractical and unnecessary burdens on law enforcement, and could allow a known or suspected terrorist to buy a gun even when the government has filed an emergency petition to block the sale. And the Grassley amendment does nothing to fix the gaping holes in the background check system. I am concerned that the Grassley amendment could actually make it easier for individuals with known mental illnesses to obtain firearms. Anyone who is watching this debate to determine which proposals would help prevent the next Orlando tragedy need to understand that neither the Cornyn nor Grassley amendments would have stopped the Orlando shooter from getting his guns. Congress must pass bills that fix loopholes in a responsible way, not create more dangerous gaps in our gun laws.

The vast majority of Americans support stronger background checks, and they want to prevent terrorists of all types from obtaining guns. If Senators listen to their constituents, they will do the right thing and vote for the Feinstein and the Murphy amendments to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and suspected terrorists. And they will vote against the Cornyn and Grassley amendments.

In the wake of mass gun violence, whether the victims are members of the LGBT community, African American church parishioners, first graders in an elementary school, college students, military service members or others in our community, we are called as Americans to come together in solidarity. We must come together in support of the victims, their families, law enforcement personnel and first responders, and the entire community tonight. And we must come together to enact real solutions that will prevent further acts of senseless violence.

To the millions of Americans who agree with Ella, I hope you are watching the Senate today. I thank Ella for reminding us all that we cannot stand idly by and wait for the next tragedy to offer our thoughts and prayers. Now is the time for Congress to act to pass common sense measures that have languished for too long and could save American lives. I support the amendments offered by Senator Feinstein and Senator Murphy, and I urge my fellow Senators to do so the same.

#####