

Safer Country Press Release

On Tuesday night, March 7, David Hogg, one of the surviving student activists who emerged from the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018, interrupted his midterms at Harvard University to appear via Zoom for a symposium at George Mason University's Schar School of Government and Policy that was arranged and co-sponsored by the gun violence prevention nonprofit organization, Safer Country.

Hogg was one of the student leaders of the March For Our Lives worldwide event centered in Washington, DC that inspired millions of people to stand against gun violence. He and his fellow student activists won the 2018 International Children's Peace Prize in South Africa and, ever since, he's served on the board of the March For Our Lives organization.

The room of 50 or so people, including researchers and a table full of Moms Demand Action activists in their red shirts, was emotionally moved when Hogg described the horror of what he went through and how he grateful he was that he and his sister survived and how urgent it is that no young person, or anyone, lose their lives due to gun violence.

The symposium was co-moderated by Schlar School Dean Mark Rozell and Safer Country Executive Director Paul Friedman. When asked by Friedman about his view of red flag laws, Hogg replied with emotion. "It's personally important to me, because my mother got a death threat from a person... We used the law that we created after Parkland -- ERPO (extreme risk protection order) law -- to disarm the person that threatened ... my mom. The law we passed ... may have prevented me from having to bury my own mom."

In a draft speech that Hogg shared with us first, he detailed the many things we can do to make a difference legislatively and the need to move past partisan politics to achieve progress. He closed by asking our audience to "Join me in making a pledge today for someone you love. Let us work together, not as Democrats or Republicans, but as Americans. Let us make this change a reality... Let us join together in the pursuit of the belief that someday school shootings and gun violence will be left in our history books and not our headlines."

The panel that followed focused on the value of Virginia's red flag law and other ways law enforcement could reduce gun violence.

The panelists included Fairfax County Commonwealth's Attorney Steve Descano, Franconia District and Public Safety Chair Supervisor Rodney Lusk, Sgt. Amanda Paris, ESRO Coordinator for Fairfax County, and former Fairfax County NAACP President Sean Perryman. Appropriately, Prof. Faye S Taxman led off the evening with welcoming comments after helping to make the event possible.

Friedman opened by thanking the Fairfax County government and Supervisor Rodney Lusk for working together with Safer Country to create a model first-in-the-nation red flag public awareness campaign with the slogan, "Prevent A Gun Tragedy – Speak Up!" Displayed in the room at Van Metre Hall was the sign bearing that slogan that is now in 344 Fairfax County connector buses.

Friedman later observed something that is on the lips of more and more gun violence prevention leaders now. He said, "Guns are now the leading cause of death for children and teens." He added that one million guns are stolen a year due, in part, to a lack of safe storage. Many of those guns end up in the hands of children and criminals, yet Republicans have blocked efforts to pass laws to address this.

Over the course of the evening, Sgt. Paris described the workings of the Emergency Substantial Risk Order (ESRO) and Substantial Risk Order (SRO) rules and her role in the process. These orders are designed to get guns out of the hands of people found by a court to be a danger to themselves or others. She pointed out that a Commonwealth's Attorney or the police can request an order and the public can call 9-1-1 if they want to report someone they are very concerned about.

Sgt. Paris described one case where a woman requested an ESRO via her therapist. The woman was afraid of what she would do if she bought one. Sgt. Paris said, "We've had cases where a friend called 9-1-1 saying, hey, my friend just called me, and he is currently walking into a store where they sell guns, and we have actually stopped that person right at the door there, and they said that if they had access to firearms they would go ahead and buy one and kill themselves."

Supervisor Lusk discussed the relatively new co-responding program by Fairfax County police to better handle police engagement with the public by pairing a police officer with a mental health specialist for calls that require that expertise. “We can reduce the use of force and better protect the people in our community.” He noted that, “when we talk about trying to reduce guns in our community, we do have a voluntary program where individuals in the county can call the police department and ask if the police will come out and take a gun or ammunition. He was proud to say that over 900 guns had been taken off the streets that way. He also offered a plea for people with a mental health or substance abuse background to apply for a job in the County. They have co-responder slots open.

Commonwealth’s Attorney Descano began by saying that “even in the safest jurisdiction in America we still have a problem with guns.” He went on to say that Amanda described how to get an emergency substantial risk order but, he said, “my office's responsibility is to go into court and fight for the substantial risk order which can last up to 180 days.” He pointed out that to be successful and remove an estimated 300 guns from the street “we created a specialty team because we needed to build that expertise.”

Descano emphasized that, “We are taking this seriously [in Fairfax County], and we're really proud that you know we're making a difference in our community. Every ESRO and SRO is a potential life saved...That is why raising awareness of these things is so important...that's why I'm so glad that you're all here, I'm so glad that the panelists are here, I'm so glad that we're working with Safer Country.”

The final speaker, Attorney Sean Perryman, who ran for the Democratic nomination for Lt. Governor in 2021, shared his concerns about gun violence by the police and the lack of trust some communities, in particular the Black community, have with law enforcement in places around the country. “So,” he said, “that's the thing that stands out to me most with the red flag laws is to make sure we have that community trust, that community engagement, that we're always reaching out, that we're building among activists...that we're working together with each other to make that beloved community that John Lewis spoke about.”

It was agreed among the panelists and others that trust was a key issue. Friedman thanked Perryman for that important point and said that schools must also ensure that students feel they can trust school systems so they will come forward when

they learn vital information. He described a recent case in Texas where a student was mistreated by the system as a setback in that effort.

Supervisor Lusk added that, “I appreciate what Sean said about trust and use of force. Let's be frank here. We do need to figure out how we can reduce the use of force within our police departments in our minority communities. There is a study that we had done by University of Texas at San Antonio which gave us definitive information and data on the impacts...“When there are two female officers that go on a call,” he said, “those two female officers have probably close to 0 percent chance of using excessive force...It tells us that we need more women in our police department...I want to give a shout out to [Fairfax County Police] Chief Davis in that he has a goal to increase the percentage of women in Fairfax County to 30% by 2030, and I have seen in the last two academies that we've had upwards of 30% of our participants that are women.”

In answer to a question from the audience, Sgt. Paris made an important point. “Having train[ed] officers has really helped that as well, because a majority of the time it's not someone calling, saying, I think you need to take a risk order out on someone, it's our police officers responding, noticing what's going on and there's a light bulb that this is a case where an order is deemed necessary, and going out and obtaining it that way.”

Other issues that came up in the Q&A were suicides by veterans, taxation of ammunition by Prof. Taxman, and domestic violence cases.

Friedman's final comments mentioned that approximately \$5 million dollars is potentially available from the federal 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act to Virginia to facilitate and promote our red flag law, but as of now there's serious concern that Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin will not accept it. Also, if a 5th Circuit federal court decision is upheld by the Supreme Court, removing a gun from someone served a domestic violence protection order would be unconstitutional.

A final point was made from the audience by Safer Country President, Boyd Walker, who pointed out that Virginia's governor sought to repeal Virginia's red flag law in this last legislative session. (That legislation was blocked, as other repeals of common-sense gun laws were, by the Democratic-controlled Senate.) He reminded people that an election was coming in November for every Virginia Senate and House seat, so people should plan on voting.

The full video of the event will be posted on Safer Country's website and is available now to the press upon request.

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