



Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence
ACTION ALLIANCE

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Op-Ed: **Give a Gun, Take a Gun: Not a Smart Solution to Domestic Violence**

Firearms and domestic violence are a lethal combination. A fact we are reminded of far too often here in Virginia. As we write this, Louisa County Sheriff's Office is investigating another heartbreaking **murder-suicide** of a husband and wife in our Commonwealth.

31% of all homicides in 2014 in Virginia were attributed to family and intimate partner violence. 54% of those homicides were committed with a firearm.

We are pleased that after many years of consideration and countless lives taken at the hands of domestic violence perpetrators, policy leaders in Virginia have reached an agreement to pass legislation that would take guns away from perpetrators of domestic violence. HB 1391 and SB 49 prohibit persons who have a permanent Family Abuse Protective Order against them from possessing firearms for the duration of the order. This bill would make Virginia's law more consistent with federal law, and is a significant, **evidence-based step** toward reducing these preventable deaths and saving lives in the Commonwealth.

We are concerned that as policy leaders take this important step to advance victim safety, they have recently passed two bills that may be harmful to victims, families, and communities.

These potentially harmful bills, House bill 766 and **Senate bill 626**, make it easier for people who carry a Protective Order to use the order in place of a concealed weapons permit for 45 days until the order expires, circumventing existing concealed weapons permitting procedures. The bills send a dangerous message to victims of domestic violence: firearms will keep you safe.

One **Louisiana Sheriff**, speaking two days after a woman with a restraining order against her husband was found murdered at her home, echoed HB 766/SB 626's misguided theory by encouraging domestic violence victims to take the law into their own hands: "Ladies...when you're in a situation like this, shoot him in your backyard before he gets in your house. Drop him."

Though well-intentioned, advice like this contradicts what we know about the dynamics of domestic violence, how firearms are used to terrorize and harm in cases of domestic violence, how trauma victims may (or may not) react in the face of being further terrorized, and how the criminal legal system harshly punishes victims of domestic violence when they defend themselves, particularly women of color.

No evidence exists to support the theory that introducing a firearm into volatile situations where a history of domestic violence exists makes victims and their families safer. On the contrary, the presence of a gun in a domestic violence situation makes it **five times more likely** that a woman will be killed.

Victims of domestic violence are routinely sentenced for long prison terms for doing exactly what HB 766/SB 626 tacitly encourage victims to do: defend the lives and the lives of their children with the use of a firearm. A **California state prison study** found that 93% of the women convicted of killing an intimate partner had been abused by that partner.

Women of color, in particular, face harsh penalties for defending themselves against abusive partners and protecting their children. Case in point: **Marissa Alexander**, the Florida mother who was sentenced to 20 years in prison for firing a single shot near her abusive husband. She testified he had physically abused her and that on that day threatened to kill her. No one was injured, but a jury convicted her in 12 minutes.

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Lastly, victims of domestic violence, like all people, may experience a variety of reactions to life-threatening situations, ranging from mobilizing to immobilizing reactions. The implicit directive to “fight back” by using a firearm to defend oneself may not be an option available to all trauma survivors **in the physiological sense**. The complexity of the situation is compounded in cases where the threatening person is a family member, where children may be present, or where fear of the abuser immobilizes a victim.

Deaths from firearms are the proverbial tip of the iceberg in the larger scheme of gun violence. **Lisette Johnson's op-ed** in the Washington Post reminds us of the stories of Virginians who are shot by their violent partners, survive, and live the rest of their lives trying to help their families heal from the trauma.

We, the Virginia Sexual & Domestic Violence Action Alliance and Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, thank the Governor and Republican leadership for coming together to support HB 1391 and SB 49 which move Virginia forward by taking firearms away from offenders.

While we appreciate policy leaders' intention to protect victims of domestic violence, we disagree with their assessment that HB 766/SB 626 will increase safety for victims.

To reduce domestic violence homicides, we must remove firearms altogether from volatile and dangerous domestic violence situations.

Virginia Sexual & Domestic Violence Action Alliance
The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence

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About the Virginia Sexual & Domestic Violence Action Alliance

The Action Alliance has been Virginia's leading voice on sexual and domestic violence for more than 30 years and enhances response and prevention efforts through training, public policy advocacy, public awareness programs, and technical assistance to professionals. www.vsdvalliance.org @VActionAlliance

About the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence

The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence (Ed Fund) is the 501(c)(3) affiliate organization of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV). The organization has engaged in a number of successful public education campaigns over the years aimed at reducing gun death and injury. www.efsgv.org @EFSGV