

DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE

Editorial: Gun buybacks send message, secure results

Tuesday, October 15, 2013

(Published in print: Wednesday, October 16, 2013)

The recent Hampshire and Franklin gun buyback day was declared a success by public safety officials and, despite naysayers who call such programs ineffective, we're going to call it a success, too.

More than 300 guns were collected on a Saturday this month at the Northampton and Greenfield police departments. Many of the guns were weapons people had inherited but didn't want, were forgotten in a closet, or were turned in by hunters who no longer needed them. Most of the guns were unremarkable, but a few were special: an AR-15 assault rifle — worth about \$3,000 — and a pearl-handled 1902 Colt Browning pistol. All the guns, minus the antique pistol, were destroyed. The Browning was handed over to the Springfield Armory for preservation.

There seems to be confusion as to what gun buyback programs are all about.

For example, in a January USA Today article, "Gun buyback programs popular but ineffective," the writer explains that "researchers who have evaluated gun control strategies say buybacks — despite their popularity — are among the least effective ways to reduce gun violence. They say targeted police patrols, intervention efforts with known criminals and, to a lesser extent, tougher gun laws all work better than buybacks."

Prominent gun buyback critic Michael Scott, director of the Center for Problem Oriented Policing at the University of Wisconsin's law school says relatively few guns are recovered through buybacks, making them a waste of police time. He also says buyback programs tend to attract people least likely to commit crimes and therefore the guns retrieved are least likely to be used in crimes.

Such criticism misses the point. Gun buybacks aren't about getting criminals to turn in their weapons. Their purpose is to reduce the number of unwanted weapons in people's homes and to promote a message of gun safety in the community. For these reasons, buyback programs are worthwhile endeavours that save lives.

Guns stolen from personal collections account for 10 to 15 percent of guns used in crimes, according to Jay Wachtel, a former U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agent who has spoken out against gun control bills. He says it's the least likely way for a criminal to end up with a gun. Still, 1.4 million firearms were stolen during burglaries and other property crimes between 2005 and 2010, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. That's significant.

And the ATF as a whole does see stolen guns as a problem. In a 2013 report, the agency says "lost and stolen firearms pose a substantial threat to public safety and to law enforcement. Individuals that steal firearms are more likely to commit violent crimes with stolen guns, transfer stolen firearms to others who commit crimes, and create an unregulated secondary market for firearms."

Beyond that, keeping a gun at home is a risk. The danger increases when the weapon's owner isn't trained to secure and use firearms properly. A recent report by the Washington State Department of Social Health Services includes a chilling message for the country: Across the U.S., a child or teen is killed once every seven and a half hours with a gun, either by accident or by suicide. In 72 percent of the cases, the firearm used was kept in the victim's home.

Suicide by gun is also becoming more common. Guns were involved in 51 percent of suicides in 2009-2010, according to an August report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One of the local buybacks' organizers, Linda Shippie, is well aware of how quick access to a gun can be devastating.

“My son was successful, an all-American soccer player and he exhibited no signs of depression,” said Shippie, who works for Gov. Deval Patrick’s Safe and Successful Youth Initiative. “But at a critical period in his life, he happened to have a weapon available to him. Had the gun not been there, he may have been able to get help and been given a second chance at life.”

People clearly embrace gun buybacks. Shippie, who attended the local collections, said one man interrupted his vacation on the Cape and returned to Northampton so he could turn in his firearm. Another individual who has a home in Northampton traveled up from New Jersey to get rid of his gun.

The local gun buyback program was good for the community. We encourage organizers to consider holding additional collections in the future.