

Meeting Our Needs — Part 8: Have Gun – Will...?

Beverly Pestel, *Columnist*

“Meeting Our Needs” is a series that acknowledges the organizations and individuals who work to make our communities better, stronger, healthier and more inclusive. We know we face challenges and divisions among us, but we miss and underestimate the essential goodness of rural Wisconsinites when we fail to celebrate those who are lifting us up in so many ways. Let us hear your stories, contact bpistel@msn.com to be included in this series.



Beverly Pestel

I am still waiting for your stories of community volunteer efforts that meet our needs, until then I'll keep exploring other avenues of meeting our needs.... and this one can't wait.

The United States unquestionably has a fascination with guns, but even Paladin of the “Have Gun - Will Travel” vintage TV show preferred to settle difficulties without using his Army revolver. Also, a lot of the sheriffs in the old TV westerns made the cowhands and gunslingers leave their guns at the sheriff's office while in town – and much of that is true – look up the story of the O.K. Corral (Gun Control Is as Old as the Old West | History| Smithsonian Magazine.) So how have we gotten to where we are now, and are our current standards regarding the possession and carrying of guns meeting our needs?

First, let's be honest about the “good guys” with guns. These “good guys”

are not proving to protect us from the bad guys, instead too many are killing innocent people. Within just a couple of days we had news reports of a teenage boy shot because he rang the wrong doorbell, a young woman shot because she made the mistake of getting into the wrong car, another young woman shot when the car she was in mistakenly pulled into the wrong driveway, and a 6-year-old girl and her parent shot when a basketball strayed into a man's yard. Can we honestly say that guns are not getting into the hands of people who should not have them? Can we honestly say that our current gun laws are meeting our needs?

There are those who **believe** that instances like these can't happen here, and they will continue to **believe** that they can't happen here – until they do. And given the occurrences of gun violence across the country, it is almost certain to eventually happen here. Wisconsin does have a gun violence rate slightly below the national average, but that is not very reassuring.

Wisconsin, as well as the rest of the nation, does have a majority of citizens who **think** that facts matter, and **think** that common sense matters, and **think** that innocent life holds more value than virtually unrestricted gun access. According to a Marquette University Law School poll in 2022, 56% of Wisconsinites are very concerned about gun violence, 81% think Wisconsin should have red flag laws, and 79% support mandatory background checks. We need to seriously come to grips with the competing issues of gun access rights and meeting our needs of freedom from the fear of gun violence reaching our communities. So, what has been happening in the Wisconsin Legislature to address the will of the majority of Wisconsinites regarding access to guns?

In October 2021, Assembly Bill 637 and Senate Bill 624 required background checks on all gun sales. These bills never had a public hearing. At the same time, Assembly Bill 638, which was a red flag law, also never had a public hearing. To move out of committee and eventually

become a law, the committee chair must schedule a public hearing. However, if the committee chair chooses not to hold a hearing on the bill it is “killed” in committee. The Chair of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee was Rep. John Spiros (R-Marshfield), he continues to be the Chair in 2023. Rep. Todd Novak (R-Dodgeville) is also on that committee. In the 2023 Items in Committee, I saw no pending bills regarding either gun background checks or red flag laws.

Wisconsin ranks 23rd in the country for gun law strength according to Everytown for Gun Safety. Things that Wisconsin does not have that could help meet our needs in keeping us safer are a requirement that handguns have a childproofing feature, a regulation on ghost guns, restrictions on high-capacity magazines, no carry after a violent offense, and relinquishment of guns for convicted domestic abusers. A lot of folks would like the restrictions to go much further, specifically the banning of assault weapons, but even these regulations could make us safer without coming anywhere near a curtailment of legitimate 2nd Amendment rights.

We probably cannot change those who **believe** that guns are not the problem. But the majority of those who **think** that sensible gun reform is necessary to meet our needs of saving lives can prevail. That only happens, however, if we insist that our legislators work to meet our needs by passing bills that help keep us safe from gun violence.

It should be the obligation of the legislature to address the obvious preferences of the majority of Wisconsin residents, yet, they are not. Instead, in April of 2022, after the Uvalde school shooting, Gov. Evers was compelled to veto three Republican bills that would have expanded the ability to carry concealed weapons, including one that would have let people with concealed carry permits bring guns onto school grounds in their cars.

Then, of course, there are those who contend that more guns in more places would make us safer, but the facts don't

bear that out. According to a report from U.S. News in January 2023, in 2017 U.S. civilians held an average of 120.5 firearms per 100 people, the highest rate in the world by a factor of more than two. Yet, recent reports have shown the U.S. to have among the world's highest rates of gun-related deaths through interpersonal violence, self-harm, and unintentional injuries.

We can fix this, we can meet our need of reducing gun-related violence, but we need laws to get us there. We need legislators who respect the will of the people and meet our needs by giving us laws to make us all safer. The mindboggling thing is that many of the voters who say we need sensible gun reform will go into the voting booth at the next election and cast a vote for those who we know will never allow these gun reform measures to become law. No more “thoughts,” no more “prayers,” and no more empty rhetoric about mental health. If our current Representatives won't meet our needs for gun reform - vote them out, we can't afford to simply wait until the unthinkable happens here.

It has been reported that Sen. Marklein indicated that the Republicans plan to remove several gun violence prevention measures from Gov. Evers's proposed 2023-2025 budget. Legitimate question – does this issue really belong in a budget bill? Actually, yes, according to Everytown for Gun Safety, gun violence costs every Wisconsin resident \$1448 per year. Sen. Marklein, however, says these should be standalone bills – hmmm, we saw how well that turned out in 2021 didn't we. Enough. For God's sake, enough.

How many other ways to meet our needs may have escaped our notice and deserve our support? Let me know at bpistel@msn.com.

Beverly is a retired professor. She lives in a remodeled farmhouse and tends 40 acres of woodland in Richland County. When not in the woods she spends her time reading, writing and enjoying the beauty of the Driftless Area.

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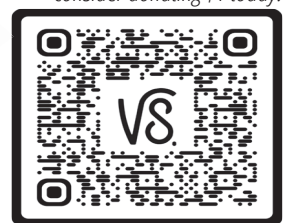
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