

Gun Violence: What Can Be Done and Who Needs to Do It

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

On Thursday, May 2, a crowd gathered at the Philadelphia Ethical Society to hear a panel on “Gun Violence: What Can Be Done?” sponsored by Protect & Elect, a Philadelphia-based political action and education organization. The panelists discussed Philadelphia’s decades-long history of gun violence, as well as the more recent mass shootings around the U.S., and gave their perspectives on actions that are being taken and should be taken.

The tone of the meeting was informative and constructive in spite of the tragic theme. On that day, there were about 100 shootings in the city of Philadelphia, which is considered a normal day.

Moderator Shira Goodman, Executive Director of CeaseFirePA, introduced the speakers and discussed the political situation in Pennsylvania. Even though there are enough Pennsylvania legislators to get gun control laws passed, Republican committee chairmen refuse to bring gun control bills to a vote.

CeaseFirePA’s website shows candidates’ scores based on their voting record on gun violence prevention and a featured action for citizens to take now. Goodman’s message is simple: “Vote for candidates who support gun control legislation.” <https://www.ceasefirepa.org/>

Panelist Dorothy Johnson-Speight, Ph.D., Founder and National Executive Director of Mothers In Charge, whose mission is violence prevention and intervention through education, spoke about how her organization supports families when they lose a loved one to gun violence. Her son was murdered in 2001 in a dispute over a parking space. “The pain of that loss is with me every day,” she said. “You don’t get over it, you just get used to it.”

Panelist Erica J. Harris, M.D., Assistant Professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine at Einstein Healthcare Network, is also medical director of Einstein’s Trauma Intervention Program, whose mission is to prevent further violence by providing psychological support and social services to young adults who have been violently injured. <https://www.einstein.edu/trauma-and-critical-care/tip>



Sen. Sharif Street addresses the audience, as fellow panelists (from left) Erica Harris, MD, Dorothy Johnson-Speight, PhD, and moderator Shira Goodman listen.

Dr. Harris says violence spreads like an epidemic, as illustrated by maps of violent hotspots. Violence in neighborhoods and schools causes *chronic traumatic stress* among children exposed to it. The Centers for Disease Control conducts some research, but legislation supported by the NRA has stifled critical funding for ongoing research. Without such funding, research providing data-driven solutions to gun violence remains elusive.

Panelist Sharif Street, State Senator from Pennsylvania’s Third District in Philadelphia, and a leading advocate for better gun laws, spoke about his children and his North Philadelphia neighborhood. He said almost all the families in the neighborhood have a family member or friend who has been a victim of gun violence. Sen. Street emphasized the need for Pennsylvania voters to elect a Democratic majority in the next State Senate, so that critical gun control measures can actually be brought up for a vote. As long as the Senate remains under the current Republican leadership, there will be no chance of such laws coming up for a vote. <http://www.senatorsharifstreet.com/>

Legislative fixes are required on the state level. Cities can pass gun control laws but because of lawsuits brought by the NRA, municipal ordinances have been disallowed. Pennsylvania is known to be a source of cheap and plentiful guns, from which the majority of illegal guns in New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Ohio flow, due to lax Pennsylvania gun laws.

Gun control is complicated and there is no one law that will solve all problems. Laws are needed to regulate what types of guns and ammunition may be purchased, and who can purchase them. But lesser known issues also need to be addressed. For example, currently guns can be purchased in quantity and then sold on the street with no permit. When these guns are traced to the original purchaser, he can simply tell the police the guns were lost or stolen. To help prevent this practice, a law is needed requiring the reporting of missing guns.

Two students from a local March for Our Lives chapter represented the student viewpoint focusing on school shootings. Schools now have practice drills for students so they will know what to do if a shooter is in the school. This organization, as well as others in the audience, works to register new voters so they can make their voices heard. <https://marchforourlives.com/>

Others in attendance at the forum included State Senator Vincent Hughes and newly elected State Representative Movita Johnson-Harrell, another strong antigun-violence advocate.

Protect and Elect’s mission is “to help elect candidates who represent and will protect our democratic values and are committed to making our country more equitable and inclusive.” For more information, please go to: www.protectelectphilly.com