

View: We can do more on guns

Heriberto Contreras and the Rev. Gawain de Leeuw 5:17 p.m. EDT October 15, 2015

The military and police should demand that gun manufacturers support gun safety measures



(Photo: Westchester United)

When President Obama lamented the sad state of affairs after the shooting rampage in Oregon, many wrung their hands with him. Yet there is something we can do and something the president can do – right now.

We, the taxpayers, buy more guns and ammunition than any other single purchaser. Law enforcement and the military made up 40 percent of the 2012 market for guns and ammunition. We, the people, keep the major firearms companies in business with bulk purchasing contracts, tax breaks and other subsidies.

Indeed, the public sector is not just important to the firearm industry – we made them what they are. Since the 1850s, when American law enforcement first began carrying sidearms, gun companies have learned Samuel Colt's lesson in marketing new weapons – sell a gun to an individual, you've sold one gun, but sell a gun to a police department, and you've armed an entire village. That's because if a gun is good enough for officers, it's good enough for most gun owners. This business model mastered by Colt, was repeated by Smith and Wesson and then Glock. Indeed, Gaston Glock, an entrepreneur who knew little about guns, designed his first gun in response to the Austrian military's RFP for a new hand gun. Glock Inc. debuted this revolutionary pistol by marketing to American law enforcement, and it is now the most popular sidearm for law enforcement and in general. Yet, while an Austrian military request inspired a revolution in modern handguns here, the largest sidearm contract in U.S. history is moving forward with no consideration of safety practices.

Use our leverage

We support the gun industry, and what do we get in return? Sure, we get guns and ammunition for police and military. But we also get gun manufacturers and their allies fighting common sense reforms, protecting gun traffickers and shutting down any attempts at safety innovations. It is time we demanded for more. It is time we, as large scale purchasers, realize our leverage in this market and put it to use.

Over the last few years, while the gun death tickers have gone up, the Department of Defense has overseen a competition to replace the standard sidearm of members of the U.S. military. Instead of simply asking citizens to lobby elected officials, the White House could demand that these manufacturers support gun safety ventures in the name of national security.

The federal government, along with the City of New York and New York State, should demand any gun manufacturer receiving public business set strict standards for authorized dealers, such as requiring thorough training for all clerks in detecting "straw purchases" and more thorough background checks of purchasers. We and they should also invest in gun safety technology. While this would not stop all gun crime, it would make it harder for guns to end up in the hands of those who shouldn't have them, and would save countless lives.

Smart guns

Our campaign, Do Not Stand Idly By, has organized 74 municipalities from across the country that are starting to ask hard questions of gun manufacturers. We organized the first ever Smart Gun Show, hosted by the New Rochelle Police Department. Here developers of smart guns and gun safety technologies, some of whom have been otherwise bullied out of the marketplace, displayed their emerging technologies to representatives of nine police departments in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey. This event found police officials interested in seeing more. Absent, however, were the largest purchasers, the ones who could make a huge dent in investing in smart gun technology, the New York City Police Department and the federal government.

It's time we demand more, as taxpayers and as people who believe that there is more our country can do to protect lives. Local municipalities should get involved in our effort to demand a new and changed gun industry. And the president should use the power of the presidency to protect Americans from gun violence. The president, who likes basketball, should realize the ball is in his court.

The writers are leaders of Westchester United, a network of houses of worship and community organizations.

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