

**JOHN A. LAWRENCE**  
STATE REPRESENTATIVE  
13<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
HARRISBURG

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April 15, 2013

Dear Mayor Henry,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment on gun regulations and gun violence via letter. I regret that I cannot be with you in person as we are currently in session, but I wanted to send along my thoughts as it pertains to this important and timely subject.

Like all law-abiding citizens, I abhor the tragic shootings that have occurred in our nation. These heinous crimes should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, and in my view, capital punishment should be the penalty if and when the perpetrators are found guilty. As the father of two young daughters, their safety and security is a primary concern for me, and I cannot begin to imagine the grief that has followed the senseless violence we have seen not just in Colorado, Virginia, and Connecticut, but locally in Nickel Mines just a few miles up the road.

There has been a great deal of conversation recently regarding guns. I will focus my comments on two main points: First, recent actions taken in the Commonwealth to crack down on illicit gun buyers, and second, my views on new rules or regulations on law-abiding citizens.

The General Assembly took significant action last session to increase the penalties for straw purchasers of guns. For those unfamiliar with this term, a "straw purchaser" is an individual with a clean criminal record who can pass the two required background checks in Pennsylvania to purchase a gun, and then takes those guns and resells them at a profit to criminals who cannot legally purchase firearms. This is a serious issue, and a number of crimes, including the murder of a police officer in Montgomery County in September 2012, have been committed with these illegally trafficked guns.

The new law increases the penalties on straw purchasers from what was a mere slap on the wrist to hard time in prison. This law was welcomed by the law enforcement community and heralded as a significant tool to cut down on gun violence. I might add that at the time this law passed last year, it received very little attention in the press.

In a separate action, the Commonwealth recently released over 600,000 mental health records to NICS, the federally run gun background check database in an effort to keep firearms out of the hands of those with mental issues. This was an important and necessary step. I support these actions, and together they make progress towards curbing gun violence in a real, palpable way.

There has been a great deal of talk recently concerning new or additional regulations on law-abiding gun owners. I cannot support this type of rhetoric for several reasons.

First, I am not a supporter of passing new laws just to say we have done something, when the results of these new laws will do nothing to cut down on gun violence. I point to Chicago, which has very strict gun laws. If passing lots of laws was the answer to gun violence, Chicago should be the safest city in America. Unfortunately, it is plagued by violence, as criminals don't obey the law and enforcement is weak.

Second, I have sworn to uphold both the Constitution of Pennsylvania, and the Constitution of the United States. Both contain language upholding the right of law-abiding citizens to bear arms. As I see it, the right to keep and bear arms is a cornerstone of our nation, and it is a right that should not be taken for granted. I might add that the Pennsylvania Constitution contains language that, in the opinion of many, is even stronger than the US Constitution. Article 1 Section 21 of our state Constitution reads:

*The right of the citizens to bear arms in defense of themselves and the State shall not be questioned.*


This language is clear in its intent and meaning, and I take the responsibility of upholding both the US and Pennsylvania Constitutions very seriously.

To summarize, I would consider efforts to curb gun violence that:

- Show clear, measurable results
- Keep guns out of the hands of criminals
- Do not infringe on the constitutional rights of law-abiding citizens
- Do not create more laws, regulations, etc. that are feel-good in nature but have no measurable results

I appreciate the opportunity to provide these written comments, and I appreciate the continued work of the borough council on behalf of the people of Oxford. Thank you for the opportunity to serve in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Lawrence", written in a cursive style.

John Lawrence  
State Representative  
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania