

Opinion: As San Diego city attorney, here's why I value gun violence restraining orders

Not every city is like San Diego, where we act quickly to intervene in crisis situations by removing guns and allowing potential perpetrators the opportunity to get the help they need.

BY MARA W. ELLIOTT

Three years ago, an angry employee at a San Diego hospital was plotting revenge against management. At home, he had amassed a small arsenal: 11 guns and 13,000 rounds of ammunition. At work, he hacked into the hospital security system that controlled the opening and locking of doors. He shared with frightened co-workers the names of those who wished to kill.

He never got the chance. A co-worker contacted San Diego police. Within hours, a judge approved my office's request for a Gun Violence Restraining Order, allowing police to seize weaponry from the trailer where he lived. We'll never know how many lives that GVRO saved.

Tales of foreseeable workplace violence are not unusual. This San Diego example echoes others where preventative action wasn't taken and tragedy ensued: at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, a Walmart in Chesapeake, Virginia, a transit center in Santa Clara, and a post office in Edmund, Oklahoma. It's a long list.

Locally, my office has obtained more than 50 GVROs against individuals who intended to kill three or more people, shootings classified as mass casualty events. Some identified with mass killers and hoped to emulate or eclipse them. The intended targets were typically strangers, and the venues were often workplaces, schools and public spaces where crowds gather.

When I read about a mass shooting elsewhere in our country, I wonder whether the killer signaled his intentions to the extent we could have obtained a GVRO

had he lived here. Often the answer is yes. But not every city is like San Diego, where we act quickly to intervene in crisis situations by removing guns and allowing potential perpetrators the opportunity to get the help they need.

Here's how we're different:

- California has a GVRO law that allows quick action when a judge is presented with credible evidence of a threat of violence. Guns are often removed within hours of the court issuing an order.
- San Diego puts resources into GVROs; many California jurisdictions do not. My office developed its GVRO program soon after I took office, and today our Gun Violence Response Unit is a national leader. Funding the unit is a priority of mine that our mayor and council support.
- Law enforcement is on board. Two San Diego police chiefs, Shelley Zimmerman and David Nisleit, have been unwavering partners. SDPD officers are trained to build solid cases and to do the dangerous work of seizing firearms from those who won't surrender them.
- And the citizens of San Diego — the unsung heroes in most GVRO cases — are not resigned to living in a world where gun violence is the norm. They report violent conduct and lethal threats by people with access to guns, knowing that GVROs are a tool for law enforcement to prevent violence, rather than just deal with its aftermath.

Most GVROs originate when someone spots the “red flags” of impending violence — often a person being menaced by an abusive spouse or ex-boyfriend or threatening suicide. Studies show that removing guns from these high-risk situations saves lives. Domestic violence is 500 percent more likely to be lethal when abusers have guns, and firearms are the most effective means of suicide. San Diego's suicide rate dropped again in 2021, and I believe GVROs deserve some credit. Roughly one-third of our GVROs are sought to prevent suicide. Because they are civil orders, GVROs won't create a criminal record for a loved one. It's a crisis intervention tool that saves lives.

Citizen involvement is equally important to prevent mass shootings. It's not unusual for school shooters to announce their intentions to friends or on social

media. Local examples include one high school student who posted a photo of his classroom on Snapchat and a threat to “shoot up a school tomorrow.” Another warned friends, “Don’t come to school tomorrow. I’m going to shoot up the school.” Both times, law enforcement was alerted and guns were seized before tomorrow arrived.

Similarly, signs of potential workplace violence will likely be seen first by co-workers. We’ve obtained GVROs to avert shootings everywhere from a car dealership to a charity, from a defense contractor to a marijuana dispensary, and all because employees saw clear warning signs and didn’t think reporting them was someone else’s job.

San Diego’s GVRO success is built on teamwork and a shared commitment to public safety that begins with citizens like you. If you see something, say something. Together we are saving lives and allowing individuals in crisis to get the help they need.

***Elliott** has been city attorney of San Diego since 2016.*