April 2, 2019
The Honorable Marc Berman
California State Capitol, Room 6011
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB 521 (Berman) – SUPPORT

Dear Assemblymember Berman:

Psychiatrists for Gun Violence Prevention (www.psychgvp.org) is pleased to support AB 521, which would task the University of California Firearm Violence Research Center (Center) with developing and implementing education and training programs for health care providers on preventing firearm-related harm.

Psychiatrists for Gun Violence Prevention was founded in February 2018, in the weeks following the shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Besides the shock and upset that we felt hearing of yet another mass shooting—Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs having occurred just within the preceding six months--several of us psychiatrists in the public sector felt a concern over the misleading narrative that mass shootings were strictly a problem of “mental illness” and not a problem of easy firearms accessibility. The robust conversation that ensued led to the creation of our group.

Along the way, many of us realized that there was a lot about gun violence that we and our colleagues did not know. Because of this, an important element of our mission is “to facilitate meaningful change through education, organizing, and professional collaboration.” Our website serves the educational piece of our mission, as it provides information on different dimensions of the gun violence problem, including suicide, homicide, domestic violence, and mass shootings. The website is intended to be an ongoing reference for both health care professionals as well as the lay public.

I can speak from a personal note that during my time at UCLA (School of Medicine) and UCSF (psychiatry residency), I did not receive any kind of lecture or training on gun violence, other than cursory mentions to “ask about guns” when doing a suicide assessment. At a staff meeting within the past year, I asked my fellow psychiatrists and social workers if they had ever heard of an ERPO (extreme risk protection order). California has had one in effect since 2014, yet most of my colleagues did not know it existed in California, nor how it worked, nearly four years after implementation.

Roughly 50% of suicides nationwide are by firearms. Studies indicate that a substantial number of people of who complete suicide have had some kind of contact with a
healthcare professional in the preceding month. Health care providers are very likely to have contact with individuals at risk of gun violence -- not to mention family members and friends of those at-risk individuals-- and therefore need education and training on this issue.

AB 521 is important because it recognizes the unique role that health care providers must play in solving the gun violence problem facing our society and that the Center is uniquely qualified to equip them with the education, training, and resources needed to identify patients at risk for such harm, provide evidence-based counseling to mitigate risk, and intervene in situations of imminent danger.

Thank you for authoring this important piece of legislation.

Charles C. Lee, MD
Psychiatrists for Gun Violence Prevention (P4GVP)