



More than 60 pediatricians and physicians from around the country traveled to Washington, D.C., on Dec. 6-7 to meet with members of Congress to push for increased gun safety measures. *Courtesy of Elliot Lieberman, M.D.*

Pediatricians, other physicians keep pressure on lawmakers to enact stricter gun laws

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As she watched her two children collecting candy at the Fourth of July parade in Highland Park, Ill., last summer, Emily Lieberman, M.D., FAAP, recalled attending the event when she was younger. Dr. Lieberman grew up in the community and now is enjoying many of the same traditions with her own family.

The idyllic July 4 scene, however, was shattered when the sound of gunfire erupted from an unknown direction.

“It quickly became clear that, one after another, we were being shot at from somewhere,” Dr. Lieberman said. “Pretty soon it was hundreds, maybe thousands of people running and screaming.”

Dr. Lieberman and her husband, Elliot, who also is a physician, each grabbed one of their children, locked eyes and started to run through the crowd, unsure of where to go or what to do.

“As we looked for each other, we got lost in this absolute stampede of people,” Dr. Lieberman said. “I couldn’t find my whole family. There were 13 of us, but I found my mom and stepdad who both have limited mobility. We pushed through and made our way to a storefront, and we ran into the back of the store into a single-occupancy bathroom. There were 16 people in that bathroom for two-and-a-half hours.”

Not knowing what the threat was, the group sat as silent as possible in the dark, while trying to assure the children that everything would be OK.

“... It was definitely the scariest day of our lives,” said Dr. Lieberman, who eventually learned her husband and daughter were able to run safely to a friend’s home, where they too were locked down for several hours.

In the following weeks and months, the Lieberman family felt grateful that they survived the shooting, which left seven people dead and many more injured. But they also experienced guilt and anger. In her practice, Dr. Lieberman has seen parade attendees who are dealing with anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“It absolutely ruptured our sense of safety and security,” Dr. Lieberman said. “That inability to feel like I could send my kids to normal activities and still feel that they are safe is what motivated me as a mother to create change.”

Tragedy leads to advocacy

Dr. Lieberman had considered her advocacy role as a pediatrician largely to be in her office, caring for patients. But the July 4 tragedy inspired her to do more.

She joined March Fourth, a nonpartisan organization founded in the wake of the Highland Park shooting. Just nine days after the group was formed, Dr. Lieberman was among more than 500 people who went to Washington, D.C., to meet with members of Congress and the White House to support a federal assault weapons ban.

In early December, Dr. Lieberman returned to Washington to pressure lawmakers to enact stricter gun laws. She was joined by dozens of physicians representing more than half the states, including Roy A. Guerrero, M.D., FAAP, the only pediatrician in Uvalde, Texas, where 19 students and two teachers were killed at Robb Elementary School last May.

AAP Iowa Chapter President Marianka Pille, M.D., FAAP, also made the trip.

“It was really eye-opening and remarkable,” Dr. Pille said. “The whole thing was incredibly well thought out and organized and really designed for maximum impact with trying to get as many people from as many states into the offices of their elected representatives as possible. It also wasn’t just pediatricians. It was physicians that take care of trauma patients, it was surgeons and it was all sorts of specialties so that multiple perspectives were shared and heard. It was wonderful to collaborate across specialties that way.”

Nevada Chapter Vice President Terence McAllister, M.D., FAAP, traveled to Washington with his peers to offer his perspective as an Air Force veteran and a researcher who studied home gun storage.



Courtesy of Elliot Lieberman, M.D.
Jose Jaramillo, R.N. (from left), Emily Lieberman, M.D., FAAP, and Roy A. Guerrero, M.D., FAAP, have been personally touched by gun violence.

“We recognize that gun violence, and in particular the massive and random nature of assault weapon violence, is a public health crisis and is not, or at least should not be, a partisan issue,” Dr. McAllister said. “It was great being in a group of peers all passionate about the same thing.

“Physician burnout is a real problem for us all over the country ...,” he continued. “But taking time to address a public health issue in a larger context helps remind me of the good I can do as a physician and reminds me why I took this path.”

With gun violence recently becoming the No. 1 cause of death among children in the United States, Dr. Lieberman said she and her peers will continue their pursuit of safer communities.

“Hearing expert testimony from physicians and how everyone trusts their doctor and listens to physicians for public health matters, I guess I didn’t realize how important we could be in this topic,” Dr. Lieberman said.

“I’m certain we will make change ... and once we take politics out of the equation, the lawmakers can realize there is data and evidence to support this ban and get on the right side of history and save some lives.”

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