

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

---

NEWS AND ANALYSIS

JANUARY 07, 2016

## Foundations Applaud White House Gun-Violence Actions



By Eden Stiffman

Some nonprofit and foundation leaders are heralding a move by the White House this week to curb gun violence and called on others to take up the issue.

In an emotional speech in the East Room of the White House on Tuesday, President Obama announced executive action to strengthen the enforcement of gun laws, and require more gun sellers to be federally licensed and to perform background checks

An emotional President Obama announced Tuesday that he would take executive action to strengthen gun laws.

---

for all purchases. They also increase federal funding for mental-health care.

The actions are more modest than far-reaching gun regulations that Obama and some members of Congress proposed in 2013 and are sure to face legal challenges. Still, foundation and charity leaders are applauding efforts to bypass a gridlocked Congress unwilling or unable to pass comprehensive gun legislation.

A handful of foundations, which together have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into gun-safety efforts, hope the president's spotlight on the issue will lead more grant makers to join their ranks.

"There was a time when foundations were really on the sidelines of this issue because they felt that Congress was gridlocked. They felt that it had been pronounced as politically dead in Washington," said John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety.

Now that foundations are seeing action in individual states and in the White House, he said, "this issue has been taken off of life support and been given a new beginning."

Nina Vinik, the gun-violence prevention program director at the Joyce Foundation, described the president's announcement as "genuinely incredible and rewarding." The foundation is a longtime leader on the issue, with nearly \$80 million in grant making since 1993 in three main areas: state policy reform; educating the public, law-enforcement officials, and others; and research and data collection to help with policy making and advocacy. Before he was president, from 1994 to 2002, Mr. Obama sat on the Joyce Foundation board.

### **Signs of Progress**

The California Wellness Foundation has given about 800 grants totaling more than \$130 million to violence prevention in the state since 1992. Back then, California led the nation in the number of people dying from gun violence each year. Since then, the number of gun deaths has declined by 60 percent, and the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence has recognized that state as having the strongest gun-safety laws in the country.

Still, about 30,000 people were killed by gun violence in the United States in 2013, more than 21,000 of which were suicides, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The guns are here now, but we can make a difference," says Julio Marcial, a program director at the foundation. "We can make a dent, and that's worth investing in, given this endemic public-health issue."

### **A Long Struggle**

Foundations and philanthropists have been grappling with the gun issue for decades. Leaders include billionaire philanthropist and former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. In 2014, he pledged \$50 million to create the umbrella organization

Everytown for Gun Safety to serve as a counterweight to the National Rifle Association, with chapters in every state and lobbyists in more than half. According to its tax filings, the organization brought in \$36 million last year.

And though others have joined in, some nonprofit leaders question why even more have not.

Ladd Everitt, director of communications at the advocacy group Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, questions why some of the largest foundations that work on social-justice issues and democracy have not been more vocal on gun violence.

"There are so many groups who have the resources to really make a huge dent on this issue but who have refused to touch it," he said. "We do need to see foundations showing the boldness and leadership that our president showed today."

The David Bohnett Foundation, a family foundation based in Beverly Hills, Calif., has committed about \$5 million to organizations working to prevent gun violence nationally since its creation about 16 years ago.

Michael Fleming, the foundation's executive director, said he hopes that foundations and donors who care about issues like education and the arts realize that their goals may not be achievable if someone isn't also dealing with violence that may keep children from getting to school or from taking advantage of the arts in their communities.

"You'll find plenty of foundations that support LGBT rights, plenty of foundations that support choice, plenty of foundations that support what have been at times controversial societal issues," he said. "And yet there seems to be among many foundations a fear of treading into this area."

## **Money for Research**

Leaders at several foundations say philanthropic dollars would be best spent on research, especially because of the dearth of federal funding for that purpose.

Mr. Feinblatt of Everytown for Gun Safety compares the fight to reduce gun violence to the wars on big tobacco and efforts to make automobiles safer, saying "the bedrock of those efforts was research."

The White House executive actions could spur foundation support for research and other efforts, advocates say.

Incidents of gun violence have already spurred foundations to join together on the issue, and not only to support research. In 2011, following the Tucson shooting that killed six people and wounded 13 others, including U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, the Joyce Foundation created a donor collaborative housed at the New Venture Fund. Donors to the Fund for a Safer Future, which include the MacArthur, McCormick, and Broad foundations, have given \$5.5 million to the fund, which has spurred others to donate \$27 million in grants to similar efforts.

Ms. Vinik of the Joyce Foundation was in the East Room to hear President Obama speak on Tuesday. She was surrounded by advocates, grantees, researchers, policy leaders, and families and survivors of gun violence.

"The president very obviously was genuine in his comments and frustration with congressional inaction and his determination to do whatever he can within his legal authority to try do something to reduce the terrible toll of gun violence," Ms. Vinik said. "We really see it as another latest example of renewed momentum around this issue," adding: "We're really feeling very optimistic of the future prospects for this work."

*Note: An earlier version of this article mistakenly said that 30,000 people were killed in 2013 by gun violence in California; that figure is for the United States.*

*Send an email to Eden Stiffman.*