

'Donna's Law' could save Louisiana families from heartache

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By The Times-Picayune Editorial Board

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Katrina Brees posted this message on Facebook Wednesday (Feb. 13):

Here we go!!!!

Thank you for helping me make this happen!

#ripmamadonna

She was celebrating the fact that two Louisiana legislators have agreed to cosponsor "Donna's Law," which would allow Louisianians to voluntarily opt out of gun purchases.

The legislation is named in honor of Ms. Brees' mother, Donna Nathan, who died by suicide last June. Ms. Nathan had been in and out of psychiatric hospitals three times in 2018, but she was able to buy a .38-caliber revolver the day she died. She was found dead from a gunshot wound in Audubon Park eight hours after she bought the gun.

Two days after her mother died, Katrina Brees posted an idea on Facebook about a way to save others who might be suicidal:

"People suffering from bipolar and depression have no way to protect themselves from a suicidal gun purchase in Louisiana.

"I wish my mom could have registered herself as being unfit to buy a gun. She would have signed it years ago to protect herself and our family. I'm sorry to be so raw, I feel raw. I can't believe how impossible it was to get my mom help and how easy it was for her to buy a gun."

Eight months later, Ms. Brees' legislation to create a voluntary "do-not-sell" gun list has bipartisan sponsors: Metairie Republican state Rep. Danny Martiny and New Orleans Democrat Rep. Jimmy Harris.

"If someone thinks they have a problem and want to opt out, they can. I don't think we're infringing on anyone's rights," Rep. Martiny said. "I can't imagine anyone would be opposed to it."

He's right. Donna's Law wouldn't be an erosion of the Second Amendment. The registry would be voluntary and is not permanent.

In Washington, which in January became the first state to enact a do-not-sell registry, the main concern was that people could be coerced to sign up for the registry. Proponents added language to the legislation to forbid that.

There is no waiting period to buy a gun in Louisiana. You only need an ID to prove you are 21 and be able to pass a criminal background check.

People with a mental illness can be refused the right to buy a gun here, but only if a judge has ordered them to be involuntarily committed for treatment. Ms. Nathan had committed herself voluntarily, so there was nothing to prevent her from buying the gun the day she died.

Katrina Brees [told her mother's story to NOLA.com](#) | Times-Picayune reporter Richard Webster as part of our "Fragile State" project examining the failings of Louisiana's mental health system.

Thanks to her, Louisiana could be the next state to establish the registry. Legislation also is proposed this year in Massachusetts and Oregon and is being considered in Alabama.

Donna's Law could be life-saving. There were 677 suicides in 2016 in Louisiana, and 440 of them were by firearms.

It's impossible to know how many of those people might have been saved by a registry. But Katrina Brees believes her mother would have made a different decision if she'd had a chance.

Suicide is often an impulsive decision, so slowing down that impulse could be helpful. Only 10 percent of people who survive a suicide attempt later kill themselves, research shows. But guns are the most lethal method, so there aren't as many survivors.

The names of people on the do-not-sell list would be entered into the National Instant Criminal Background System. Names can be removed, but there is a waiting period of one to three weeks before a gun purchase is allowed. That safety measure is meant to keep people from removing their names abruptly to commit suicide.

People on the no-sell list also can provide contact information for family or friends they want notified if they ask to be removed from the registry.

"Our state has one of the highest rates of gun suicide in the country and we know that the presence of guns increases the risk and lethality of suicide attempts," Victoria Coy, founder and director of the Louisiana Violence Reduction Coalition, said. "This bill allows people in a time of crisis, or those who may face a time of crisis, to be proactive in their own defense."

Donna Nathan didn't have that chance, but the Legislature should make sure others do.