ANATOMY OF GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

On November 12, 2013 the Dayton Area League of Women Voters brought together a range of viewpoints in a forum on the topic of gun violence. The highly civil discourse of this forum was influenced by being held in First Baptist Church, with the pastor, Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy, setting the tone in giving the welcome to the audience.

Highlights from the Panel

James R. Ebert, MD, MBA, MPH, FAAP, CPH, Program director of the MPH degree program at Wright State University

Dr. Ebert characterized violence as a contagious disease, giving examples of how victims can become perpetrators. While he acknowledged some decline in murders over the past 20 years, he emphasized how violence in America far exceeds levels seen in other industrialized countries. Violence can be influenced by familial patterns and environmental factors that can impact the developing brain. Social media can be a way to spread the “disease” of violence. Given his background as a pediatrician, Dr. Ebert wanted to turn our attention to interventions now underway to curb gun violence. He ended with a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King: “Violence is the language of the unheard.”

Sandy Hunt, Montgomery County Prosecutor’s Office, Victim/Witness Division

Ms. Hunt discussed programs and services available through her office, taking us back to 1990 when the Violence Prevention Project was created. That program aligned with school systems as an early intervention effort. She has found in recent times that 75% of kids between the ages of 10-18 in an urban environment have first hand knowledge of someone killed by gun violence. That generation has become desensitized by the constant onslaught of violent acts--be it through the media (TV and videogames) or toxic environments. If constantly exposed to physical aggression, children
may tend to pattern the behavior. She cited the need to determine access to weapons, presenting a recent case of a young adolescent, left home alone, who accidentally killed a playmate using his father’s gun. Charges were filed against the father.

State Representative Fred Strayhorn

Representative Strayhorn made a distinction between the US Constitution and the Ohio Constitution, citing the Ohio document as more definitive on the right to bear arms. Though our focus was on gun violence, he made the point that our society as a whole is more violent than others, possibly due to cultural causes such as teenage pregnancy. The de-escalation of respect between and among the citizenry contributes to the culture of violence. From a political perspective, he made the point that pro-gun enthusiasts can be single-issue voters with any government action viewed as an infringement on their 2nd Amendment rights. While 2nd Amendment rights can be stressed, one must keep in mind that Constitutional power is not absolute. He ended with a plea for advocates on both ends of the gun debate to come together and find common ground to address this issue.

Sean Walton, Community Initiative to Reduce Gun Violence

Mr. Walton explained how law enforcement partners coordinated efforts with the community initiative to provide a multi-jurisdictional approach. He emphasized the need not to normalize gun violence. His efforts focus on getting the community to join with him and manage the human factors that underlie gun violence.

Joe Eaton, Buckeye Firearms Association

Mr. Eaton pointed out how the LWV position on gun control was the exact opposite of what his position is with respect to guns. Nevertheless, he recognized the need for his organization to take advantage of opportunities to make their views heard. His primary concern was with keeping families safe, joining others on the panel in agreeing that we live in a violent society. He implored those of us not enamored with guns to look at the full impact of gun laws.

Attorney Richard Saphire, Professor of Law Emeritus at the UD School Of Law
Attorney Saphire cited two important court decisions in his discussion about the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Amendment

*District of Columbia v. Heller (US Supreme court, 2008)* (5-4 ruling, holding that the Second Amendment confers an individual “right of law abiding, responsible citizens to use arms in defense of heart and home.”)

*McDonald v. City of Chicago (US Supreme Court, 2010)* (5-4 ruling, holding that the Second Amendment right recognized in Heller applies not only to the federal government, but to state and local governments as well.)

His overview of those cases left two questions still under debate:

- How broad is the Second Amendment right?
- Can the government regulate the Second Amendment right?

Valerie Lee, Action Chair