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Dear Senators Bob Casey & Pat Toomey,

We, the students, staff, and faculty of the University of Pittsburgh, are deeply concerned.

We're concerned that our classrooms could, at any moment, become the site of mass carnage and destruction. We're concerned that our students have now practiced more active shooter drills than they have fire drills. We're concerned that every balloon popping or textbook dropping makes our hearts skip a beat, as we all walk around traumatized, knowing full well that 100 Americans lose their lives each day to gun violence and that we could very well be next.¹ We're concerned that our students of color fear interacting with police officers, and for good reason, as police are increasingly militarized and police shootings are, tragically, nothing new to the Pittsburgh community. We're concerned that whether it be by mass shooting, targeted assault, domestic violence, police brutality, or suicide by firearm, that our community continues to be plagued by gun violence and the fear of it. But, most of all, we're concerned that saving 40,000 lives per year continues to be a partisan issue. And so we – your constituents – are looking to you. Senator Casey and Senator Toomey, we are looking to you to protect us from the next instance of gun violence, to lead your colleagues in passing commonsense gun legislation, and to prove that gun violence truly is preventable.

As academics and scholars, we know that a government's primary responsibility is to protect its citizens. And right now, we need you to protect us.

But thus far, you haven't. We acknowledge and are grateful for the gun violence prevention legislation that you have sponsored and cosponsored in the past, but frankly, it hasn't been enough.

The one year anniversary of the horrific Tree of Life shooting has now come and gone, but our Pittsburgh community continues to be profoundly traumatized by the deadliest attack against American Jews in U.S. history that took place in our own backyard. The sound of sirens still make us freeze in place, notifications from the university still bring back memories of the dreaded "run, hide, fight" text, scores of armed guards still flank the entrances to our houses of worship. We're hurting, we're scared, and we're deeply frustrated by the inaction of our elected officials in preventing gun violence. Thus, at the one year anniversary of the massacre that added our city's name to the worst list in the world – the list that includes Columbine and Aurora and San Bernardino and Las Vegas and Parkland and Dayton and El Paso and all of the other cities that have been forever changed the emotional, physical, psychological, and economic pain of a mass shooting – we've come to realize that the very least our elected officials can do is prevent the list from getting any longer.

Because you and your colleagues have yet to do so, however, our community is turning our pain into action and demanding that you do the following on our behalf:

1. Pass S.42 – universal background checks – "Background Check Expansion Act"

As you well know, S.42 aims to expand background checks for every gun sale that occurs in the United States. We know that background checks are an extremely effective tool for reducing the number of gun deaths that occur in our country, and we need you to pass S.42 to ensure that every gun sale is subject to this life-saving process. According to the Brady Campaign, “States that have expanded the scope of their background checks have seen impressive results—53 percent fewer law enforcement officers are shot and killed in the line of duty, 47 percent fewer women are shot by intimate partners, and cities in states with expanded background checks see a 48 percent reduction in gun trafficking.”² Clearly, background checks are an effective way to prevent gun violence; please do your part to pressure Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to bring this measure to the Senate floor for a vote, and please vote for this measure, yourself.

2. Pass S.447 – high capacity magazine ban – “Keep Americans Safe Act”

High capacity magazines are what enable mass shooters to do the greatest amount of damage in the shortest period of time. A high-capacity magazine is a device that feeds ammunition into a firearm that holds more than 10 rounds of ammunition. Today, models exist that can hold 20, 30, 50, or 100 rounds of ammunition in a single magazine.³ The Pittsburgh shooter used high capacity magazines to increase the carnage caused by his weapon, as did the Parkland shooter, El Paso shooter, Dayton shooter, and countless others. As a community still reeling from the pain caused by a white supremacist’s access to assault weapons and high capacity magazines, we urge you to advocate and vote for a high capacity magazine ban.

3. Pass S.66 – reinstate an assault weapons ban – “Assault Weapons Ban of 2019”

Assault weapons are especially deadly weapons designed to harm the most amount of people in the shortest amount of time. According to Everytown for Gun Safety, “Assault weapons are generally high-powered semiautomatic firearms where each round has up to four times the muzzle velocity of a handgun round. This means that each round from an assault weapon inflicts greater damage to the human body than a round from a typical handgun.” What’s more, assault weapons and high-capacity magazines are frequently used in mass shootings, resulting in more deaths and injuries.⁴ As members of the Pittsburgh community, we intimately know this to be true, as the Tree of Life shooter used an AR-15 to murder our friends and neighbors. If you value the sanctity of human life, we implore you to support a reinstating of the assault weapons ban to protect innocent Americans from the mass carnage enabled by assault weapons.

4. Be a voice for compassionate, commonsense leadership

Meet with your caucuses/allies and urge them to support bringing the aforementioned legislation (especially S.42) to the Senate floor for a vote. Our lives are on the line and we need courageous, compassionate leaders to be a voice for us; to champion a re-framing of the “gun debate” to be about saving lives rather than pursuing partisan agendas. We know you can be those leaders.

5. Publicly and strongly denounce white supremacy in all of its forms

The Tree of Life shooter screamed that “all Jews must die” before firing indiscriminately at innocent worshippers praying in their synagogue. The police officer that shot Pittsburgh resident Antwon Rose repeatedly fired at the unarmed, 17 year old black boy as he attempted to flee. The officer was allowed to serve in the police force and carry a firearm, despite having a record of harrassing students of color while serving as an officer on campus. Whether it be a mass shooting or an instance of police brutality, Pittsburgh has the scars to prove that the intersection of gun violence and white supremacy is particularly deadly. In order to prevent future hate crimes, we need you to publicly, strongly, and repeatedly denounce white supremacy. As some of the most powerful lawmakers of the most powerful country in the world, you have a moral imperative to be a voice for justice

and equality. You have a responsibility to call out and denounce white supremacy before it leads to innocent people's deaths.

6. Respond to our concerns in a constructive, meaningful way

We expect that this letter will be read, considered, and discussed with the utmost amount of respect for the pain and trauma that our community has faced because of gun violence. While we need you to take the legislative steps outlined above, we also hope that you'll consider keeping this conversation going with us and with your other constituents. We hope you'll meet with our students, staff, and faculty leaders to discuss gun policy and violence prevention programs. We hope you'll make a statement to the press and publicly acknowledge both our pain and your commitment to preventing gun violence like we've experienced from ever happening again. We hope you'll hear our voices, know our stories, and take action on our behalf.

As you finish reading, please know that this letter is a plea for safety, for justice, for a state and country free from the horrors and pain of gun violence. We are not coming to you from an antagonistic nor a partisan place. We're coming to you as students, as educators, as concerned citizens, and, more importantly, as human beings. Please put our lives and the lives of other Pennsylvanians and Americans above money, endorsements, and party lines. We need your help, your compassion, and your leadership to prevent gun violence. Please do what's right and help end the American gun violence epidemic. Our lives and our futures are in your hands.

With hope for a more safe, just, and peaceful America,

The University of Pittsburgh community | Authored by the Undergraduate Student Government Board

The [# OF SIGNATURES] below signed individuals are members of the University Pittsburgh community and by adding their names to this letter, are declaring their support for and endorsement of this message.
