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OPINION

Opinion: Here's an Easy Way to Improve Gun Safety

Jan 31, 2011 – 5:00 AM

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Frank A. S. Campbell
Special to AOL News

Since the Tucson, Ariz., tragedy, many people have renewed calls for more gun control measures. But there's already a perfectly good law on the books that could improve gun safety in this country right now. Congress, with the president's support, just needs to fully fund it.

Some background: The FBI's [National Instant Check System](#), or NICS, was created under the 1993 Brady Act to provide information to gun dealers on whether a buyer is prohibited from possessing a firearm. The system has processed more than 121 million checks since it began in 1998 and has denied close to 2 million transactions. Its service is commendable, with more than 91 percent of checks providing dealers with a final determination within minutes.

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But these checks are only as good as the information available. And information is needed on felons, illegal drug users, fugitives, those convicted of domestic violence, the dangerously mentally ill and others. Without it, illegal gun purchases can't be denied. In the case of the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy, the shooter was able to buy guns because information about his mental health history was not available to the NICS.

Incomplete data also delays gun sales to lawful buyers for hours or days while the FBI seeks missing information, such as whether an arrest ended in a conviction or was dismissed.

Over the past 15 years, a [Brady Act grant program](#) gave states \$545 million to improve criminal history and other records needed for gun background checks. This money helped automate millions of records, making them available for nationwide checks. But these investments have taken us only part of the way. The information is still far from complete.

For example, more than half of the arrest records available through the FBI system are still missing crucial information on what happened to the charges. This means we need more information from courts and prosecutors' offices.

In addition, at the time of the Virginia Tech shootings, only three states had provided the NICS with significant information identifying people with prohibiting mental health histories. Several states since then have begun submitting such information, but most have not. So, although Jared Loughner was never adjudicated with a dangerous mental illness, most other disturbed people who have been still can't be stopped from buying a gun because the NICS doesn't know about them.

In response to Virginia Tech, Congress passed the [2007 NICS Improvement Act](#). The law authorized \$1.3 billion in new state grants to establish ways to submit complete and up-to-date information needed for NICS checks. But only token funding has been requested to fix the information gaps.

The last Bush budget asked for \$10 million, just 5 percent of the \$187.5 million in NICS money authorized in 2009. The Obama budgets sought only \$10 million for NICS grants, less than 3 percent of the \$375 million authorized, in each of the years 2010 and 2011. NICS Act appropriations have been similarly meager -- \$10 million in 2009 and \$20 million in 2010. And Brady Act grants have dwindled to about \$10 million a year for the past five years.

At this rate, it will take 130 years to reach the funding levels authorized by the NICS Act. That's hardly the game changer trumpeted when the act was passed.

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In contrast, the nearly \$1 billion in funding since 2004 for improvements to the [national DNA database](#) has totally transformed that system's size and public safety impact. The rapid progress in advancing the use of DNA evidence took presidential and congressional leadership that is nowhere to be found on the NICS front.

When clearing the way to final passage to the NICS Improvement Act, budget hawk Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., urged prioritizing NICS over other spending, noting that "this authorization will have no effect unless, in fact, we appropriate the money to the states to carry out this notification system."

Even in this time of budget austerity and deficit reduction, we shouldn't wait for yet another national shooting tragedy to prioritize spending to get the information needed to stop illegal gun buyers.

Frank A. S. Campbell is the CEO of [Highland Strategies LLC](#), a Washington, D.C.-based security consulting firm. Previously, he served as deputy assistant attorney general and senior counsel in the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Legal Policy (1999-2008) and as an FBI assistant general counsel (1994-1999), where he played a central role in developing and guiding the NICS program and authored the 2006 attorney general's report on "[Criminal History Background Checks](#)."

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