

I am a dad, a high school teacher, and a citizen sick of shootings. After each of fifty-one separate gun incidents, I have called my Congresswoman, Jaime Herrera Beutler. She hasn't moved an inch on the issue.

Here's what it's like to call an intractable legislator fifty-one times.

When I contact my Congresswoman, it's most often from my parked car before I walk in for a day of teaching. Her office in my city of Vancouver, Washington isn't yet open, but DC office is. A staffer answers the phone by saying "Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler's office, how may I help you?" I give my name, say I am a constituent, and state the gun-related incident that happened the previous day. I ask a question—usually if this will be the time that the Congresswoman takes action to make future gun-related incidents less likely. The staffer politely says that he or she will "pass that message on to the Congresswoman."

I hang up, walk into work, and wait for the next shooting to call again. It usually doesn't take very long.

When my alma mater of Columbine High School became famous eleven years after I graduated, I didn't think of it as an issue for Congress. At the time, it felt like a bizarre, inexplicably evil event to be endured rather than explained. But over the years, the shootings kept coming. I called my Congresswoman after the Sandy Hook shooting and got a letter back. But once former students of mine were endangered at a 2014 shooting at Seattle Pacific University, I decided I had to call my Congresswoman after each noteworthy shooting.

I set some rules for myself. "Noteworthy," I decided, means either local or newsworthy. So while I contacted my Congresswoman after horrible shootings like in Charleston (call #6), Chattanooga (#7) or at a Texas football viewing party (#41), I also called her after nearby gunmen caused lockdowns at my sons' elementary schools (#5, #34, and #37) and at my own school (#40), as well as for the shooting deaths a classmate (#32) and a sister (#20) of students I have taught.

Now, after calling about the deaths of four people at a car wash in Pennsylvania (#50) and the deaths of 17 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (#51), my perspective on mass shootings remains the same: we need to make a ton of shifts, both in policy and in culture. But my repeated exposure to Representative Herrera Beutler and her staff have damaged my views of her and of Congress in general.

After phone calls in response to the first half-dozen or so shootings, I was able to sit down with Shari Hildreth from the Congresswoman's staff. She listened to my suggestion that we take time to learn about potential gun buyers. I don't know whether she actually shrugged her shoulders or if that was just in my memory, but I do remember she said "Second Amendment" as her response. There was no point, she argued, in suggesting laws that that Supreme Court would surely strike down. I left that meeting less confident than I was when I walked in.

I took to emailing Ms. Hildreth in place of phone calls for a while.

A Roanoke, Virginia television journalist and a cameraman were shot down on live television (#9). "I have forwarded this to the Congresswoman and her DC staff."

A college acquaintance's boyfriend was shot to death by her ex-husband in a murder-suicide (#10). I received no response.

Eight were killed at Umpqua Community College in Oregon (#11). "The gunman is responsible," I wrote. "but make no mistake, Ms. Hildreth. Our lawmakers are culpable...The next massacre is predictable...We know it will happen again unless we take action."

"Thank you for sharing your thoughts on this heartbreaking event," Ms. Hildreth responded. "I will pass your thoughts on to the Congresswoman."

I gave up on the emails and got back on the phone.

Over time, I grew to dread the macabre ritual of it all: a killing, a phone call, a promise to pass on my concerns, a failure to act. Repeat *ad nauseam*. Repeat to literal nausea.

After the Pulse nightclub shootings (#17), I was invited to my only face-to-face meeting with Representative Herrera Beutler. After some small talk, she asked: "what exact changes would you like me to make?" I suggested that we slow down the process of buying a gun so we could look into the would-be buyer—to see if that person might plan imminent harm.

"Can't we at least Google them?" I asked at one point.

To my surprise, Rep. Herrera Beutler, she of the A rating from the NRA, responded affirmatively.

But that hopeful moment faded by the end of the meeting. All the phone calls had taken a toll: I was too emotional and not articulate enough. I became flustered and left angry.

Shootings continued. I got back on the phone.

I took to ending each phone call with the phrase "Talk to you after the next shooting." When five police officers were killed in Dallas (#21), a well-meaning staffer responded with a perky voice, saying "That would be great!" On other occasions, staffers would laugh at my closing sentence. I couldn't gauge if the laughs were nervous or smug. If I was more frustrated than usual, I'd ask what they thought was so funny.

After shots were fired at a nearby Wal-Mart (#26), I got a phone call from a woman named Courtney, who proudly announced that the Congresswoman was working hard to prevent people on the no-fly list from purchasing guns. The Congresswoman, she added, would continue doing "all she can" to prevent future gun violence. I respectfully suggested that a sole focus on gun-wielding terrorists, a problem tied to only two of my contacts (#13, San Bernadino, and #17, Orlando), was nowhere near doing "all she can."

That was 24 phone calls ago. I haven't been called or emailed by a staffer since.

When I expressed my frustrations after shots were fired in the parking lot of the Target where my family shops (#30), the man on the phone sarcastically said "cool!" When I asked him what exactly was so cool, he said he was talking to a co-worker who was walking by at that moment. (When I called back later that day, another staffer apologized.)

I called the DC office hours after the shootings of Republican congressmen as they practiced for their annual baseball game (#38). The woman who answered was crying, and I simply gave my best wishes to the victims, my Congresswoman, and her staff.

It was around this point that I noticed the “frequent contacts” in my phone consisted of four numbers: my wife, my parents, my brother, and my Congresswoman.

The morning after the Las Vegas shootings (#44), I read the entire list of each phone call I had made. I choked up: it took so long to read all of the dates, all of the places, all of the deaths. To my surprise, the woman who answered the phone became almost as emotional as I was. We gathered ourselves. “I will pass your concerns on to the Congresswoman,” she said.

“Thanks. I’ll talk to you after the next shooting,” I replied.

I started this fight with a sense of patriotism: I would weigh in on an issue of importance with my representative. I felt the pride of civic duty. But at some point, my morning phone calls started to feel like going in to box another round against Mike Tyson, except I couldn’t let myself throw in the towel. On more frustrating phone calls, I would ask the person on the other end of the line: “what’s the point?”

“Your voice counts,” one staffer said.

“The Congresswoman values the input of her constituents,” said another.

These fifty events account for 306 deaths—an average of just over six deaths per phone call. Five times, I have received a letter about the issue (after calls #1, #4, #11, #17, and #47). The letter’s introduction has stayed eerily similar over that time. The only change is that the location of the most recent tragedy is pasted in. “Roseburg, Oregon” became “Marysville, Washington,” then “Orlando, Florida” and finally a blanket “Texas, Las Vegas and around the United States.”

I’ve emailed, I’ve called. I’ve sent stats, I’ve sent links. I’ve been patient, I’ve been rude. I’ve been listened to, I’ve been laughed at. After all this, I have no evidence my Congresswoman is capable of change. If shootings at elementary schools (calls #1, #25, #31, and #47), at high schools (calls #4, #42, #49, and #51), at colleges (#2 and #11), at churches (#6, #43, and #46), by white supremacists (#6, #22, and #29), of police officers (#3, #21, #23, and #27) or even of her own colleagues (#38) aren’t enough to get my Congresswoman to act, what will?

Why not save my own sanity and stay off the phone?

But no—I cannot do that. Even after saying to my Congresswoman’s face that I have lost my confidence in our democracy over this issue, I have to continue to call. There is no shame in doing all I can in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

If the next shooting happens to impact my loved ones or yours, I want to be able to say I’ve done all I can to prevent it, even if it feels like a fruitless, quixotic endeavor.

So please pass on my concerns to the Congresswoman. I’ll call again after the next shooting.