In 2012, a mentally ill man walked into a movie theater with tear gas, grenades, a Glock 22 and a handgun to inflict as much pain onto others as possible.

Twelve people were killed and 70 others were injured. Colorado experienced the agony brought by evil and carnage that will never fully heal.

But Colorado also witnessed perseverance and resilience. By 5 p.m. the next evening, the community had put forward almost a half a million dollars into victim relief. Colorado came together to take care of its own.

People needed to not only feel safe and secure in Colorado, but also to actually be safe and secure. The sense of urgency loomed large. The Governor and his team had to start somewhere, do something. As the Governor often says, start with facts and data.

The facts were clear: This was a national health emergency. Governor Hickenlooper brought in national expertise and leadership to agree on a set of values: that firearms are dangerous in the wrong hands and those suffering from mental illness need greater access to help.

Shortly after, in 2012, Colorado passed some of the nation’s first background checks. Since Colorado passed background check legislation, 43,000 individuals have been denied from getting a gun. 205 of them had an arrest or conviction for homicide, 9,124 had an arrest or conviction for assault, and 2,627 of them had a restraining order against them. In 2017 alone, the background check process prevented the purchasing of firearms by 31 arrested or convicted murderers, 14 kidnappers, 120 individuals arrested or convicted of sexual assault, and 390 people who had active restraining orders.

“"The morning after the Aurora Shooting, the entire Cabinet mobilized and we had Cabinet members visiting every hotel room. The Governor attended every funeral and was the Commander in Chief while also having to manage the FBI and investigation which included oversight of the shooter’s apartment which had been ‘booby trapped.’"”

ROXANNE WHITE, FORMER CHIEF OF STAFF
(Read her written memory of the shooting)
Soon after the passage of background checks, the state also passed a magazine limits bill, capping magazines at no more than 15 rounds.

Meanwhile, Colorado’s average turnaround time for a background check is 6 minutes and 38 seconds, down from almost an hour in 2012.

Most gun deaths are actually suicides and Colorado has the 7th highest suicide rate in the nation, making it the 2nd leading cause of death for those 18-34. Last year alone, over 1,000 Coloradans died from suicide.

That’s why Governor Hickenlooper launched the GunShop Project, partnering with firearm advocates, retailers and ranges to promote suicide prevention. It’s based on a program created by the New Hampshire Firearms Safety Coalition and the Means Matter Campaign at Harvard University. Along with the Colorado Crisis Services Network, which provides 24/7 guidance from mental health professionals to anyone who needs it, Colorado has become a model for how an effective government can make a difference in public health.

“There was literally no issue facing the state that we did not tackle. I always tell my progressive friends that collaborative John Hickenlooper got more progressive achievements done in his time than any Democratic Governor I know.”

ALAN SALAZAR, FORMER CHIEF STRATEGIST TO GOVERNOR HICKENLOOPER

“After the Aurora shooting we wanted universal background checks but Republican elected officials were universally against it. We couldn’t get one vote. I went home and complained to Teddy about it. He was in 5th grade at the time and said, ‘Dad. You’re complaining… Get the facts, make a decision, and check. Next.’ The next day I went in to work and asked for the local facts. We had the national statistics but not local numbers. Those Colorado numbers became our north star, and soon after we were able to muster enough votes to put a gun background check system in place.”

GOVERNOR HICKENLOOPER