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## “The Status Quo Is Unacceptable”: Walmart and the Debate on Gun Control

It was a bright Sunday afternoon in mid-September 2019, and Helen Yumei Chang<sup>i</sup> was taking a jog through Blowing Springs Park. An avid outdoorswoman and runner, she knew she could always find solace in the natural landscapes surrounding Bentonville, Arkansas, her home and workplace for 15 years. However, today more than ever she needed the peace and quiet to clear her mind before returning to the office the next day.

When Chang became vice president of government relations for Walmart, she knew she would face challenges on a daily basis. They were impossible to avoid for the largest company by revenue in the world,<sup>1</sup> with 2.2 million associates<sup>ii</sup> and nearly 275 million customers served per week.<sup>2</sup> However, she had not expected to be faced with responding to one of the worst mass shootings in US history, which had occurred at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, on August 3, 2019 and left 22 people dead and 24 wounded.

In response, Walmart CEO Doug McMillon had released a statement one month later committing the company to discontinuing sales of specific types of ammunition and firearms and enacting tighter gun sale restrictions within Walmart stores. Simultaneously, he had urged elected officials in the White House and Congress to pursue legislative action such as strengthening background checks to prevent future gun violence. McMillon ended this call to action with the pronouncement: “the status quo is unacceptable.”<sup>3</sup>

Never before had Walmart taken such a public stand in support of gun control measures, much less attempted to influence policymakers on the issue. Chang knew that moving Walmart into the spotlight on such a divisive and emotional topic was likely to elicit strong reactions across the country, and she knew her team must develop strategies to guide and support McMillon’s actions and announcements. Walmart’s core customer base historically hailed from more rural, politically-conservative communities.<sup>4</sup> Would the company lose a significant portion of these customers to less-activist competitors? Would Walmart become the target

<sup>i</sup> Helen Yumei Chang is a pseudonym.

<sup>ii</sup> Walmart uses the term “associate” to describe its employees.

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