

Special Report

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VIRGINIA TECH: ONE YEAR LATER

Campaigns to Overrule Campus Gun Bans Have Failed in Many States

By SARA LIPKA

Ethan Elliott was a corporal in the Marine Corps when 32 students and professors were shot dead at Virginia Tech. Now he's a freshman at Pima Community College who wants to protect himself and others from a similar incident — by carrying a gun on the Tucson, Ariz., campus.

"I see no reason I shouldn't be able to carry in class," he says, "just like I carry in the mall, and just like I carry everywhere else." Mr. Elliott feels safer with his Springfield 1911 pistol close at hand.

People can bring guns most places in Arizona, but the state's Board of Regents has long banned all weapons from public college campuses. Now some lawmakers are trying to change that.

State Sen. Karen S. Johnson, a Republican, proposed a bill in January that would trump the regents' ban, allowing anyone with a concealed-weapons permit to carry a gun at a public college. Higher-education officials in Arizona are lobbying vigorously against the bill. More guns, they say, would make colleges more dangerous.

Debate over guns on campuses has rumbled on for a decade, but it erupted around the country after the mass shooting at Virginia Tech. More than a dozen state legislatures reacted to the tragedy with bills to allow students and faculty members to carry concealed weapons. Higher-education officials panicked. But now the bills are dying. Over the past several weeks, they have failed in Alabama, Indiana, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and other states known for strong gun rights. Seven more states, including Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina, are still weighing the prospect of armed campuses, but the bills there are languishing.

"It doesn't look good for this type of legislation," says Vincent Badolato, a policy associate for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Of all the bills, Arizona's has come closest to becoming a law. Conservative legislators, gun-rights groups, and students like Mr. Elliott all strongly back it. Both supporters and opponents had expected the senators to vote on the measure in early April, but as of press time, they had not.

University officials are optimistic about the bill's delay. "It's obviously hit a bottleneck," says Greg Fahey, associate vice president for government relations at the University of Arizona. "We're certainly trying to block it, and we're hoping that our efforts work."

Lobbying Against Guns

Carrying a gun at a college in Arizona is not a crime. As in many states, weapons are prohibited from public and private campuses not by law, but by institutional policy.

The State Senate bill challenges public-university officials' conception of safety, as well as their authority to

restrict weapons. "They want to control everything that goes on there," Senator Johnson says, "and to hell with people's Second Amendment right."

The state's public colleges have relied on their law-enforcement officers to argue their case.

"We thought the chiefs of police might have the most credibility," Mr. Fahey says.

The men in those posts at the three public universities — Arizona, Arizona State, and Northern Arizona — testified before a State Senate committee last month and described their opposition to the bill in a letter to senators.

Their arguments mirror those made against "concealed carry" in any public setting. Law-enforcement officers, they wrote, are trained to respond to an active shooter, and anyone who intervenes during an emergency could hamper their efforts.

The chiefs noted that campus police officers must complete nine months of academy and field training, while gun owners need only an eight-hour course to obtain a concealed-weapons permit. And the officers warned against introducing firearms onto campuses where alcohol, drugs, and theft are persistent challenges.

Mental-health issues also worry administrators, who lay out troubling scenarios. A suicidal student, for instance, sees a friend walk to the shower and grabs a gun from his unlocked room.

Anthony Daykin, chief of police at Arizona, says he has fielded several questions from legislators in the past few weeks. His main argument: Arming permit holders who may hardly practice would put the whole campus at risk.

"There are some people," he says, "who have a false sense of security based on very minimal training and exposure."

The bill in Oklahoma would have allowed only people with prior law-enforcement or military experience to carry guns on college campuses. No such amendment has been proposed in Arizona.

A few years ago, higher-education officials in Ohio, facing a similar bill, struck a deal that limits guns on their campuses to locked cars and storage units. Mr. Fahey says he is unwilling to make similar compromises.

Another part of his strategy, he says, has been steering clear of a proposal in Arizona's House of Representatives to outlaw guns on college and university campuses. That measure, introduced by Steve Gallardo, a Democrat, has not gained much traction.

Private property owners in Arizona can regulate weapons on their premises, and Mr. Fahey wants to stay in that category. "We don't like to make people think that we need a bill," he says. "Universities have the authority to govern their own campuses, and we'd like to keep it that way."

Arming 'Good Guys'

James Knitter wants it the other way. He leads the University of Arizona's chapter of Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, and he is lobbying for Senator Johnson's bill to pass.

"Instead of only bad guys carrying," Mr. Knitter says, "you'd have good guys also."

Arming students and staff members, he argues, would deter attacks on otherwise vulnerable campuses. And if mass shootings or other crimes did occur, bystanders could limit casualties by firing back.

The concealed-carry club is posting fliers around the campus to remind classmates of the shooting there in 2002, when a nursing student killed three instructors and himself. For a week this month, members of the group will wear empty holsters as part of a national protest.

Students on hundreds of campuses are pushing for the right to carry guns, says W. Scott Lewis, a spokesman for the national group. "They would like some other recourse," he says, "than hiding under their desks."

Gun-free zones like college campuses have irked Second Amendment advocates for ages. Since the shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois, they are trying harder to remove those restrictions.

"We're not going to change the laws in every state this year," Mr. Lewis says. But even where bills are initially defeated, he says, they may be revived. And in Texas, where the Legislature is not in session this year, he expects to see a campus-carry bill introduced in 2009. "We've known from the beginning that this was going to be a long process," he says.

Without a Ban

As legislative battles persist, advocates on both sides are keeping an eye on Utah.

In 2006 the State Supreme Court there struck down the University of Utah's ban on guns. Since then, students and staff members have adjusted to that reality.

"Most of us feel that the campus would be better off if we didn't have concealed weapons," says Barbara H. Snyder, vice president for student affairs at Utah. But their anxieties have largely subsided, she says. "We have not had incidents materialize."

The university requires that students with guns keep them concealed on their person or locked in safes in their dormitory rooms. Out of 5,500 residential students, Ms. Snyder says, only one requested a safe this year.

To guard against discrimination claims, Utah does not ask its students if they hold weapons permits. Students may ask for a roommate who does not carry a gun; those who make that request are paired together.

Some faculty members remain wary, Ms. Snyder says, but the thought of concealed weapons no longer induces panic. The university is relying on carefully drafted policies to manage the legal presence of guns. Not that it had a choice.

"We are mandated by state law to do this," Ms. Snyder says. "And so we do."

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Section: Special Report

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