

## **LAWMAKERS FIND NEW AFFINITY FOR GUN CONTROL**

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In a scene that might have been difficult to imagine just weeks ago, state lawmakers spent Wednesday brainstorming on gun control.

Fueled by public horror at recent shooting rampages in Colorado and Salt Lake City, firearms restrictions and anti-violence proposals have catapulted to the top of the legislative agenda in Utah.

Gov. Mike Leavitt has made no decision yet on calling lawmakers into an emergency session to enact gun-control and school-safety bills. But the topics dominated discussion Wednesday, a day set aside for legislators' monthly meetings between annual sessions.

It wasn't just talk.

Public Safety Commissioner Craig Dearden said his department is "moving forward" to expand background checks for gun buyers and concealed-weapons applicants to include court records of mentally ill people.

"We hope to have that up by the end of May," Dearden told members of the Legislature's Judiciary and Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice committees.

No legislation is needed to make the change, Dearden said.

State and federal laws already make the purchase or possession of firearms illegal for people the courts deem mentally incompetent. But that is difficult to enforce because mental-health information is not currently part of computerized, instant background checks.

People with histories of mental illness committed fatal shootings earlier this year in the LDS Family History Library and Triad Center in downtown Salt Lake City.

Dearden said a special session of the Legislature might be in order to grapple with broader issues of keeping guns from the mentally ill and from people convicted of violent misdemeanors. Currently, gun ownership is prohibited for felons or those convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence.

"There is some urgency," Dearden said, adding that the complexity of the issues also argues for a special session devoted strictly to them.

Utah Democratic leaders have pushed for tighter gun laws for years, but their effort has gained momentum as interest groups have begun to echo the demand.

Most recently, leaders of the LDS Church have declared their concern about some existing gun laws, including those involving mentally ill people and legally concealed weapons in schools and churches.

"It's time that the Legislature realize what the public realized long ago," said House Minority Leader Dave Jones. "There are just some places where guns don't need to be, and there are just some people who shouldn't have access to guns anytime, anywhere."

But some state legislators are clearly uneasy with or offended by the discussion, protesting that Utah's liberal gun laws will work just fine if they are properly enforced.

That theme was hammered home by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and its local affiliate, the Utah Shooting Sports Council.

"Before it peddles new laws, the government has got to enforce laws already on the books," said the NRA's Brian Judy.

Judy said that had the Littleton, Colo., shooting taken place here, it would have violated 31 Utah laws. He also said there have been just 13 cases of gun-free-schools laws prosecuted nationwide even though 6,000 violations have been reported.

Many factors deserve more blame than firearms, Judy said, from unresponsive school administrators to parents and news media.

"Maybe Littleton wouldn't have happened" if other school slaughters had not been plastered over the front pages of the nation's newspapers and television news programs, he said.

Utah Shooting Sports Council Chairman Elwood Powell urged legislators not to change the state's concealed-weapons laws.

Instead, he called for an end to plea bargains in weapons prosecutions. He also suggested new "parental responsibility" laws, along with repealing part of the child-abuse law to permit parents to use "physical force" to control disobedient children.

Utahns Against Gun Violence leader William Nash called for an array of gun-control laws, from requiring criminal background checks for all private gun sales to safe storage of firearms.

Nash also asked lawmakers to amend the concealed-weapons law to prohibit weapons in schools and churches.

He disputed the often-repeated claim of gun-rights lobbyists that no concealed-weapons permit holder has caused a problem, noting that an estimated 100 Utahns have had their permits revoked for violations ranging from aggravated assault to trespassing.

Members of the Education Interim Committee focused on a broad range of changes that might promote safety within the schools.

While committee members originally scheduled only an hour to hear from the PTA, the Utah Education Association (UEA) and superintendents about what might stop school violence, they spent all but 45 minutes of their three-hour meeting on the subject.

Scheduled witnesses agreed schools need the legal authority to outlaw concealed weapons on school grounds and at school functions. Utah prohibits guns in schools. An exception is made for the 24,800 people who have concealed-weapons permits.

UEA President Phyllis Sorensen added that parental-responsibility laws might help stop children from getting guns.

Educators noted many districts already have implemented safety plans to help students, staff and parents react sensibly to emergencies that might occur during school events. Rep. Patrice Arent, D-Holladay, announced a bill that would require districts to develop and disseminate those plans to ensure that they are widely known by local law-enforcement officials and people in the schools.

Many of the proposed solutions were less concrete.

The education community, for instance, complained about the level of violence in society that makes young people see killing as a solution to age-old school problems such as bullying.

"Changing those attitudes is a long-range issue," said Darrell White, superintendent of Davis County School District.

Barry Newbold, president of the Utah School Superintendent's Association and superintendent of the Jordan School District, said trusting relationships between students and adults at school can go a long way toward identifying violence-prone children.

He said crowded classrooms don't help.

"We need more support staff," Newbold said. "We need more teachers. We need more adults who can provide follow-through. That is very difficult with the sheer ratio of students and staff."

A new coalition of PTAs organized a press conference to encourage lawmakers to meet soon and enact legislation that would keep schools safe.

Another newly formed group, BoycottTrash.com, had a press conference of its own to announce an anti-violence message targeting Universal Studios and rock performer Marilyn Manson.

Said organizer Nancy Lord of Bluffdale: "The good thing about a boycott is there is no legislation required."

Another idea promoted outside the hearing rooms came from Charles Barrowes of South Salt Lake.

He suggested giving schools the funding they would need to train up to 20 percent of school employees on the proper use of firearms. Those adults could carry concealed weapons to deter violent incidents and respond to them.

Outlawing all weapons in schools would be a bad idea, Barrowes suggested in a leaflet he distributed in the Capitol hallways.

"When a student massacre is in progress, this will assure that only the innocent children are killed and wounded, sparing the shooters from any danger," the flier said.

The UEA's Sorensen said she does not believe legislators are taking the armed-educator plan seriously.

Even so, she said, "It's frightening to me that there are even people who feel that way."