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Bill: Guns the cure for school shootings

Unarmed students, teachers 'sitting ducks,' legislator says

By Howard Fischer

CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX — Sen. Karen Johnson said she believes the tragedy last week at Northern Illinois University would have been avoided, or at least would have been less tragic, if faculty members and students had been armed.

The Mesa Republican on Monday urged colleagues to approve her legislation, which would partially repeal existing laws and regulations banning weapons on campuses of public schools, community colleges and universities. Her proposal, SB 1214, allows those who have a state permit to carry a concealed weapon, which means they must be 21 or older, to have a gun on campus.

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John Pickens, Arizona State University police chief

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Johnson said without weapons, students and teachers are "sitting ducks."

The police chiefs of the three state universities, however, all told members of the Senate Judiciary Committee more guns on campus actually could result in more deaths.

University of Arizona Police Chief Anthony Daykin said situations with an armed shooter are difficult enough. But he said it would be worse if every time there were a threat, five or six people would pull out guns, each perhaps thinking the others are potential assailants.

"What kind of carnage might we have?" he asked.

And Bryan Soller, president of the Arizona Fraternal Order of Police, told lawmakers they have to look at the situation through the eyes of police officers responding to the scene and seeking someone with a weapon.

"We say, 'Police!' He goes, 'What?' It's over," said Soller, a Mesa police sergeant. "He's going to get shot immediately because if we see a threat, we're going to take him out."

But much of the debate, and the likely fate of the measure when it comes up for a vote next week, centered on the question of whether more guns might have altered the outcome of last week's incident at NIU, where a gunman killed five and wounded 16 before taking his own life.

John Pickens, Arizona State University's police chief, had a unique perspective, telling lawmakers he served at NIU before coming to Arizona.

"I don't think there is a solution to the violence we're seeing on campus," he said. "No preparation can prevent an incident."

The best answer, he said, is proper training, not only of police but also of people in the campus community.

Johnson said having police respond, even quickly, is not the answer.

"It's who's there at the time and is ready and available to take care of the situation," she said. If someone with a concealed weapon were available and already on the scene, Johnson said, "he'd be able to know who it was and, excuse the expression, plug them."

But Pickens said having multiple armed people when police respond to a chaotic scene only makes resolving the situation more difficult.

"How are we going to determine the target?" he asked. "That's where the confusion comes."

Johnson also cited a study after last year's shootings at Virginia Tech, which left 32 dead.

"There were at least 60 different points in the attack where a defender of average skill could have easily neutralized the threat of the active shooter," she said. "What is worse than allowing an execution-style massacre to continue uncontested?"

Greg Fowler of Northern Arizona University said having multiple people armed would only slow police response. He said officers would need to stop and question everyone with a weapon fleeing a building to ensure that the shooter does not also escape.

Johnson countered that not having weapons on hand ignores the reality of what can happen when there is a report of a gun on a school campus and a "lockdown" is ordered.

"They're in that classroom alone with those students," she said of teachers.

"A crazed person comes through that door; they can protect those students," Johnson continued. "Otherwise, they're nothing but sitting ducks."

Her view was backed by Rick Dalton, a former Mesa police officer who now teaches history at a charter school. He said allowing teachers to be armed would allow them to "turn the odds" when someone invades a school and starts shooting.

And UA student Jason Lewis, who has a concealed-weapons permit, told lawmakers he's not concerned about the risk of being shot if police burst into a room looking for a shooter. He said it should be "pretty obvious" who is the real assailant.

And if not?

"If the officers are trigger-happy, that's their problem — and mine," Lewis said.

Dave Kopp, president of the Arizona Citizens Defense League, said the whole concern about letting people who have concealed-weapons permits have their guns on campus is overblown.

He said 40 states, including Arizona, already let people carry concealed weapons most other places.

"There has not been blood in the streets; there have not been shootouts; people are not gunning each other down," he said.

And Gary Christensen of the Arizona State Rifle and Pistol Association said SB 1214 would not lead to a proliferation of weapons on campuses.

He said about 100,000 Arizonans now have concealed-weapons permits, out of more than 6.6 million people in the state. Using that figure, Christensen said, perhaps fewer than 1,000 students on the three campuses might be armed.

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