

Arkansas guns-in-church bill dies in Senate

February 26, 2009

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) — A highly publicized bill passed that would have allowed concealed weapons in Arkansas churches died Feb. 25 in the state Senate.

According to the Associated Press, the law amending the state's concealed-weapons law to remove "any church or other place of worship" from a list of places where firearms are banned failed by a voice vote in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

The [bill](#), passed Feb. 11 by the Arkansas House of Representatives by a vote of 57-42, divided religious leaders, with pastors testifying both for and against the measure.

The bill's lead sponsor, Rep. Beverly Pyle, R-Cedarville, said churches should have the option of deciding for themselves whether or not to allow firearms in their buildings. The Arkansas Concealed Carry Association said the issue was not whether weapons ought to be in church but rather the separation of church and state.

"The issue is that self-defense is a moral decision, and that decision should not be made for churches by the state," opined a blog on the group's [website](#). "Churches have the freedom to make this decision free of government coercion."

The [Legal Community Against Violence](#) says 48 states and the District of Columbia allow carrying of concealed weapons. Twelve states and D.C. are "may issue" states, where officials have discretion about whether to grant or deny a concealed-weapon permit, while 34 are "shall issue" states,

meaning law-enforcement officials must issue a permit to anyone who meets statutory criteria.

Most states that allow concealed weapons place [restrictions](#) on where they can be carried. The majority prohibit weapons in schools, government buildings and places where liquor is served. Fourteen states prohibit concealed weapons in places of worship.

[According](#) to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, the carrying of concealed weapons was prohibited or severely limited in most states prior to the mid-1990s, when the gun lobby, stunned by losses in enactment of the Brady Background Check Bill and Federal Assault Weapons Ban in 1993 and 1994 made overhauling state gun laws the National Rifle Association's legislative priority.

About 30,000 Americans die each year from gun violence, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

The Legal Community Against Violence, a lawyer group formed after an assault weapon rampage that began at a law firm in San Francisco in 1993, says Americans own an estimated 270 million firearms — about 90 guns for every 100 people.

Firearms are the third-leading cause of injury-related deaths nationwide, and firearm homicide is the leading cause of death for African-Americans age 45 and younger.

About 5,000 people a year die from unintentional shootings, and 43 percent of suicides are committed with a firearm. Guns also increase the probably of death in incidents of domestic violence.

Firearm-related deaths and injuries cost \$2.3 billion a year in medical bills, half of which are borne by taxpayers. Factoring in legal and societal costs, the LCAV estimated the total annual cost of U.S. gun violence at \$100

billion.

The sponsor of the failed Arkansas bill said she may try to submit the proposal again. On the same day the Senate killed the concealed-weapon bill, another Arkansas lawmaker sought to make the list of people with concealed handgun permits a secret and punish anyone who publishes the information.

Rep. Randy Stewart, D-Kirby, filed [legislation](#) to make the names of license holders confidential and punish anyone who knowingly publishes them with up to \$1,000 in fines and a year in prison.

The bill came in response to an online [database](#) to search for Arkansas handgun permits that has since been removed.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.