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WKU among those concerned by Maddox shell bill to allow guns on campuses

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Mitch Walker, chief of Western Kentucky University's Police Department.

Daily News File



Rep. Savannah Maddox

Kentucky's college campuses have long been gun-free zones. Under current law, postsecondary educational institutions are allowed to limit possession of deadly weapons on their property, including concealed carry.

A bill filed by Rep. Savannah Maddox, R-Dry Ridge, aims to join 12 other states that have changed that.

House Bill 542 was heard by the House Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection Committee Tuesday morning.

HB542 is a shell bill. When it was filed on Feb. 22, it contained generic verbiage about supporting workforce development.

However, at 3 p.m. on Monday, March 6, Maddox replaced the original bill with a committee substitute that had little to do with workforce development. While controversial, this parliamentary move is completely legal.

The committee substitute would remove the ability of postsecondary education institutions to restrict guns on their property. Maddox said that she thinks these colleges and universities should not be exempt from the Second Amendment.

Kentucky's higher education institutions disagree, said Council of Postsecondary Education President Aaron Thompson in a statement.

“Our public college and university chiefs of police are unanimous in their professional judgment that any law or policy that increases the prevalence of deadly weapons on campus makes those places where our friends and families go to work, attend school, and enjoy community with each other much less safe,” he said.

Thompson added that an increased gun presence could exacerbate the current student mental health crisis, leading to higher rates of violence and suicide.

“When a gun is readily available, a suicide attempt can become significantly more lethal,” Thompson said.

Western Kentucky University's Chief of Police Mitch Walker testified to the House committee in opposition to the bill.

He said he had concerns about responding to an active shooter situation and being unable to determine who the “bad guy” is if there were multiple guns involved. He wrote in a March 6 letter to the committee that campus law enforcement trains community members to immediately call the police any time they see someone with a weapon on campus.

Campus officers typically respond to shooting scenarios in less than two minutes, he added.

“Officers arriving so quickly could possibly mistake innocent, armed citizens with active shooter suspects, presenting a danger to both the officer and the citizen,” Walker wrote.

Maddox brought Art Thomm, a National Rifle Association lobbyist, to testify in support of the bill.

“Criminals do not abide by gun-free zones and gun-free zones make law-abiding citizens sitting ducks for criminals,” he said.



Thomm warned against arguments opposing HB542.

“Throughout the movement of this legislation, you will hear a tirade of scenarios — how crime will increase, how safety will diminish and how our children will be placed at risk, and so on. Blood will run through the streets of our state colleges and universities,” he said. “There’s one major problem with that thought process — it’s wrong.”

He said that in the 11 other states that have passed similar laws and have crime data, there was a 3-13% decrease in crime. However, Thomm acknowledged that allowing concealed carry on college campuses

was not necessarily the deciding factor leading to this overall decline in the crime rate.

Thompson was skeptical.

“We are unaware of any reliable statistical evidence that shows that students, faculty and staff carrying guns, particularly concealed handguns, reduces violence on college campuses,” he said.

Another concern Thomm brought to the committee was whether police response times in emergency situations were fast enough. He said that if students were allowed to have guns, they would be able to protect themselves more quickly.

“We believe we have a lot of protocols in place to protect our students, faculty, and staff on our campuses,” Walker said. “So introducing something to where there are more handguns and guns on campus we believe will make it a much more unsafe environment.”

WKU also released a statement on the bill.

“The safety of our entire campus community is our top priority,” it reads. “WKU is aware of the committee substitute to HB542. We will continue to engage directly with lawmakers in order to ensure they have a thorough understanding of what this proposed legislation would mean for postsecondary institutions across the Commonwealth.”

Rep. Tina Bojanowski, D-Louisville, asked Maddox which postsecondary institutions supported the bill.

Maddox said that during a January 2023 meeting with all public universities on this bill and another bill, none expressed support.

“But at the same time, we’ve been very open throughout the process, and I’m always willing to hear out the concerns of others,” Maddox said.

Bojanowski said she took exception to that response.

“I think it’s hard for the community to accept that you’re open about the process when the bill was put in as a (committee) sub yesterday at 3 p.m.” she said.

HB542 passed the House VMAPP committee 19-3, with Bojanoski, Sarah Stalker, D-Louisville, and Pamela Stevenson, D-Louisville, voting against the measure. The bill's next step is the full House.

Stalker said that she is not opposed to guns, but would rather pass “meaningful” legislation to protect people, like legislation addressing mental health, gun registration, gun training and safe storage.

“This is all what I would call very common sense, low hanging fruit best practices that we are continuing to avoid,” she said.

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