

STATE SENATOR

JESSE



JAMES

23RD DISTRICT

January 11th, 2024

Senator Wanggaard, Chair
Senator Jacque, Vice-Chair
Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety

Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 754

Relating to: possession of a firearm by a licensee in a place of worship located on the grounds of a private school

Dear Chairman Wanggaard, Vice-Chair Jacque, and Committee Members:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today on Senate Bill 754. This legislation addresses a crucial gap in our concealed carry law that leaves our churches vulnerable to attacks from those seeking to strike fear into the hearts and minds of everyday Americans.

Wisconsin has often been behind the curve when it comes to the carrying of concealed weapons. In 2011, when concealed carry passed in this state, Wisconsin was the second to last in the nation— 49th out of 50 – to enact this reform. Thankfully, responsible firearm owners have made progress on this issue over the years. However, they are still prevented from carrying in certain locations, like churches and places of worship that are located on school grounds.

This hole in our current laws has made religious places vulnerable targets at a time when religious hate crimes are on the rise. From 1966 to 2000, only 1% of mass shootings were motivated by religious hate. After that, the number escalated. From 2000 to 2014, 9% of mass shootings involved religious hate. That number jumped to 17% between 2018 and February 2020.

Senate Bill 754 seeks to provide these institutions with another layer of defense. The bill allows places of worship to authorize concealed carrying on private school grounds. The governing authority of the church would still retain jurisdiction over their property and is free to prohibit concealed carrying on their grounds. This legislation simply allows them to extend this option to their congregation if they feel warranted to do so.

Our state has come a long way in securing the right to self-defense for responsible gun owners. Let's close this remaining oversight and provide another option for churches and religious institutions on school ground to protect themselves.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James
23rd Senate District
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TREIG E. PRONSCHINSKE

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 92nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT
MAJORITY SERGEANT AT ARMS

Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety and Chairman Wanggard, thank you for being willing to listen to my testimony on Senate Bill 754.

For many of us in this room today, God and our religion play a large part in our daily lives. Church is a place to feel vulnerable, to confess our sins, grieve our loved ones, get married and bring our children to. Church also brings together a community for all kinds of people.

With this vulnerability, brings potential danger as well. There unfortunately will always be people who try to harm others. This isn't specifically targeted to one religion or another. Sadly, we have all heard of mosques, synagogues, churches and other places of worship that have had armed intruders commit heinous crimes. A place of worship is meant to be peaceful, thought-provoking, and non-violent. Intruders who commit these crimes go directly against these beliefs and principles. This is deeply saddening to me as a church goer, family man, and citizen of this great state. It disturbs me to think that somewhere meant for good can be turned to bad in a matter of moments.

Keeping this in mind, this is why I, along with Senator James have introduced Senate Bill 754. Senate Bill 754 seeks to safeguard churches with schools attached to them from potential future attacks. Under current law, with exceptions, it is considered a Class I felony if an individual is found to be carrying a firearm on school grounds. This bill would amend that and allow an individual with a concealed carry license to have their firearm in a place of worship that happens to have a school attached to it or is on private school property.

A key portion of this bill is that this is an opt-in resolution, so the board or governing body of the place of worship would have to vote this resolution into place. This is not forcing a private school with a worship space in it to take up this piece of legislation, it is simply providing an opportunity for them to do so. Churches without schools attached to them can currently allow this practice. There have already been examples of this type of bill saving lives. In December of 2019, a man open fired at people in a Texas church, while lives were lost, because someone had the ability to have a concealed carry, they were able to stop the attack from going any further.

In 2022, another place of worship was put in a dangerous situation. Three people were held hostage in a synagogue at the Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas for ten hours. Places of worship continue to be under attack and this is another relevant example. This bill has the chance to increase the safety of all church goers regardless of religion. I want safe schools and I want safe churches for my community, your community, and our great state of Wisconsin.

My hope is that you will join me in keeping our communities safe with this bill. Having licensed individuals with concealed carry is a preventative measure to make sure tragic acts are not carried out against people who are practicing their first amendment right of religion. With this bill passage, we can attend our places of worship with confidence that worshipping will be our only focus. With that, we would like to welcome any questions or comments you might have.