



TREIG E. PRONSCHINSKE

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 92nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony on Assembly Bill 597: Possession of a Firearm in a Place of Worship

Thank you members of the Assembly Committee on State Affairs for allowing me to speak on this important bill today and how it will benefit and protect the citizens of Wisconsin.

AB 597 gives places of worship that have a school attached to them the option to allow conceal carry license holders the ability to carry inside if they decide to. A place of worship could still decide that they do not wish to allow concealed weapons inside the building.

This bill is important to many people around the state and provides some peace of mind for those who may fear persecution for their faith. Self-defense is a God given right and there is nothing more selfless than being brave and defending helpless people around us.

An example of where this has saved many lives can be found in the story of Jack Wilson. In December of 2019 at West Freeway Church of Christ in Texas, a man opened fire killing church members before a church member pulled out his weapon and shot back at the gunman stopping him from injuring more people.

With rising crime rates all across the country, we have seen gun sales go through the roof with many of them being first time buyers.

According to Small Arms Analytics, in 2020 nearly 23 million guns were purchased. This is a huge surge when compared to 2019 when only 13.9 million were purchased. The National Shooting Sports Foundation estimates that last summer alone 40% of new gun buyers were women and that the largest demographic of buyers were African Americans. These statistics show that the American populace is embracing their second amendment right and should be able to protect themselves and others should a tragedy arise.

AB 597 protects Wisconsinites in a religious setting if there is ever an emergency that requires self-defense. As we have seen numerous times in many different places of worship, a gun owner can often make a huge difference in the outcome of atrocities.

Again, I appreciate your time and consideration of this important legislation.



ROGER ROTH

STATE SENATOR • 19TH SENATE DISTRICT

Chairman Swearingen and members of the Assembly Committee on State Affairs, thank you for your time today to hear AB 597.

On December 29, 2019 a terrible tragedy struck the West Freeway Church of Christ in Texas, where two members of the congregation were killed before the assailant was stopped by 71-year old Jack Wilson, a member of the church's volunteer security team. Jack, a licensed concealed carry holder, was able to rapidly respond to unfolding events and avert an even greater tragedy using his concealed firearm.

Following this tragedy, congregations across the country began to put additional security measures in place in the event the unthinkable happened. However, many congregations in Wisconsin found that they cannot allow an individual to conceal carry in their place of worship. This is because Wisconsin law prohibits a concealed carry license holder from carrying a weapon on or within a certain distance of private school grounds, regardless of the purpose or whether classes are in session. These congregations are thus barred from having additional protection and left on their own should tragedy strike.

Because of this prohibition, former Representative Mike Rohrkaste was contacted by a church in our district and worked with me on a reform. This effort and the current partnership with Representative Pronschinske has culminated with the bill before you today. AB 597 represents a common-sense reform to Wisconsin's outdated and prohibitive laws.

Under AB 597, if a place of worship is located on the grounds of a private school, has a written policy allowing CCW licensees to carry a firearm on their grounds of worship, and that individual is complying with all terms of that written policy, a licensee is eligible to carry in that location.

This is an opt-in law, meaning that unless a place of worship institutes a policy, the status quo will not change. Places of worship that wish to opt in, may apply whatever policies or requirements they wish upon CCW Licensees in order to fulfill this requirement.

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My name is Thomas Leager, and I am speaking on behalf of Wisconsin Gun Owners Inc. I am pleased to have this chance to promote AB597, a common-sense bill that would allow church congregants of legal age to carry concealed with a permit if their church is adjoined to a school or is in a school zone.

On November 15, 2017, Devin Patrick Kelley opened fire in a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, killing 26 people, including an unborn child, and injuring 22 more. His killing spree was finally ended with the assistance of Stephen Willeford when Willeford shot Kelley with his AR-15.

That is just one example of why more and more congregations are choosing to designate churchgoers to carry concealed during services. These churches refuse to be sitting ducks for evil people who seek to do evil things.

This bill would secure the same right to carry in churches connected to a parochial or private school or in a school zone that is enjoyed by those who attend churches, not in a school zone. It is just common sense that we allow these institutions to control whether they want their congregants to carry or not.

We have seen numerous examples of what happens when we allow our churches, schools, and the places in which our most precious loved ones attend, to be disarmed. Criminals seek out these soft targets in a bid to kill as many people as possible, as quickly as possible, with little or no resistance.

Rarely, if ever, do these mass shooting events happen to hard targets, such as police stations, gun stores, or any place where folks are generally well-armed and well-trained. We will never stop these events unless we understand that the solution is not to disarm the law-abiding and create defenseless victims but to arm those lawful folks who seek to defend their fellow man.

I hope that we in Wisconsin have learned the lessons of the past two or so years, as crime, violence, looting, and rioting have run rampant. We cannot be held hostage by criminals and political violence. We must empower our citizens to help themselves and have a vested interest in the safety of their communities, churches and schools.

Thank You



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Assembly Committee on State Affairs

FROM: Kim Vercauteren, Executive Director

DATE: December 8, 2021

RE: AB 597, Concealed Firearms in Places of Worship on Private School Grounds

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), I wish to express our opposition to Assembly Bill 597. This bill allows a person who has a concealed carry license to bring a firearm into a place of worship located on school grounds, so long as the place of worship has a policy permitting the concealed carry of firearms.

Before identifying the concerns that we have with AB 597, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of the bill's authors in addressing past concerns raised by faith-based advocates and thank them for responding to those concerns by requiring worship spaces to opt to allow the concealed carrying of firearms, rather than making concealed carry permissive by default.

While the WCC acknowledges and is grateful for the improvements incorporated into this proposal, we oppose AB 597 for several reasons. First, if AB 597 were to pass, the number of handguns present on school grounds and in school zones would likely increase. As a greater prevalence of guns is associated with greater numbers of accidental or unintentional firearm injuries and deaths, it is imperative that great care be exercised to mitigate the presence of firearms where vulnerable, impressionable children are present.

Under AB 597, individuals would be permitted to enter school grounds with a concealed firearm in accord with a worship facility's policy for the purpose of attending a worship service or religious ceremony, or to work or volunteer at the place of worship. This could apply when both a school and worship site are open, and in some instances, connected. While a school near a church may post firearms restrictions on buildings and grounds, this bill would allow concealed guns to be carried in unposted areas that may include shared common areas such as parking lots, community rooms, and entrances.

There is also a presumption under AB 597 that a place of worship located on school grounds is owned and operated by the same governing body that operates the school, though this is not always the case, especially when a church has opted to lease a vacant school building to an unaffiliated private school. School authorities would not necessarily know that a worship site located on their grounds permits concealed carry, as there is no notice requirement under the bill

that requires church authorities to notify the school's governing body of the concealed carry policy.

The very presence of concealed weapons undercuts one of the primary objectives of religious institutions, including schools, which is to foster peaceful relations within the family and society. Like schools, churches and buildings used for religious purposes are enclosed spaces where children and adults gather in close quarters and where the intentional or accidental discharge of a firearm can do great damage. Parents should have the certainty of knowing that when their students attend worship services during the school day with members of the parish or church community, that the same restrictions on firearms apply to that worship space as apply to their students' classrooms. All who seek the solace of worship should have the comfort of knowing that they need not fear the actions, accidental or otherwise, of their fellow worshippers.

Currently, a concealed carry licensee may not possess a firearm in or on the grounds of a school unless some other exception applies. However, there are several exceptions, including concealed carry by current and former law enforcement. Federal and state law also permits concealed carry by an individual for use in a program approved by a school or by individuals under contract with a school. In other words, if a school and worship site would like to use current or former law enforcement, design a safety program with volunteers, or even hire security, all of these are permissible under current law.

It is also important to note that under AB 597, parishes may create a policy to permit the concealed carrying of firearms, but there remain questions as to what the policy can and cannot encompass. Can the parish require licensees to inform the parish when they are carrying so that the parish is aware of how many firearms are on the premises? Is it possible for a parish to limit the number of licensees allowed on the premises at any given time, or restrict access for certain licensees that may pose a security risk to those on the premises? If a licensee fails to comply with church policy, is that individual guilty of a Class I felony as specified in Wisconsin Statutes s. 948.605(2)?

Finally, changing the current standard may expose churches and schools to liability, especially churches and private schools that cannot afford to inspect and ensure that all individuals carrying weapons onsite are properly licensed. These private entities cannot invoke sovereign immunity or take advantage of statutory limits on damages should an incident occur. As in the past, we ask that the State not place an unreasonable burden on places of worship and institutions that opt to offer a sanctuary for those seeking prayer and peace.

We urge you to oppose AB 597. Thank you.



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WISCONSIN FAMILY ACTION
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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF ASSEMBLY BILL 597
ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON STATE AFFAIRS
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2021
JULAIN K. APPLING, PRESIDENT

Thank you, Chairman and committee members, for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 584. Wisconsin Family Action supports this bill.

Wisconsin's current law prohibits concealed carry on any school's premises and extends even to prohibiting concealed carry in a church that has a school when school is not in session.

Churches with related schools should not be treated any differently from churches without schools, which under Wisconsin law have the option of whether or not they allow concealed carry. The fact that a church has a school should not put that church in a separate category. In a sense, the way this law works in our state, the school becomes the controlling entity, not the church.

However, the vast majority of churches with related schools operate just the opposite, with the church being the controlling entity and the school being a ministry or mission of the church, under the legal and corporate structure of the church. I say that because common sense would make one think that this would mean the controlling law would be that which is applicable to the church more than the school. That said, I suspect this concealed carry issue is just one area where we might have some laws that invert that.

Most churches in Wisconsin are incorporated here as not-for-profit organizations, including those with schools, which makes them legitimate private "businesses," if you will. Wisconsin law allows private businesses to determine for themselves whether they will permit concealed carry on their premises. Churches with religious schools should have that same option. Frankly, we believe any private school should have the option to allow or disallow concealed carry. The bill proposed last session provided for that.

That said, this bill does appropriately address the issue of allowing churches with schools the freedom to choose for themselves whether they will permit concealed carry—and that is exactly as it should be. AB 597 has enough safeguards built in that I would assume those who had misgivings about the bill proposed last session, would be good with this more restrictive proposal.

As we know, our churches have become targets for individuals meaning to do harm to many people at once. Church staff and individuals attending those places for any reason should have the right to defend their people, their property and their possessions without fear of breaking the law.

Thank you to Representative Pronschinske and Senator Roth for bringing this bill forward. We urge this committee to support this bill and move it quickly to the full Assembly for a vote.