

Giffords Seeks 'Bold' Action As Congress Takes Up Gun Control

Former Congresswoman **Gabby Giffords**, grievously wounded in a 2011 mass shooting, made an emotional plea on Wednesday for Congress to take action to curb gun violence, but a National Rifle Association executive said new gun laws "have failed in the past and they'll fail again."

Speaking haltingly, Giffords implored lawmakers to "be bold, be courageous" as she opened testimony at the first congressional hearing on gun violence since the Dec. 14 massacre in which a gunman shot dead 20 children and six adults at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.

Responding to outrage across the country following that incident, **President Barack Obama** and other Democrats have asked Congress to pass the largest package of gun restrictions in decades.

"Speaking is difficult. But I need to say something important," Giffords, who survived a head wound in an assassination attempt in Tucson, Ariz., in which six people were killed and 13 others wounded, told the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"Violence is a big problem. Too many children are dying—too many children. We must do something. It will be hard, but the time is now," said Giffords, who was accompanied by her husband, former astronaut Mark Kelly. "You must act. Be bold, be courageous. Americans are counting on you."

Obama's proposals to curb **gun violence** include reinstating the U.S. ban on military-style assault weapons, limiting the capacity of ammunition magazines, and more extensive

background checks of prospective gun buyers, largely to verify whether they have a history of crime or mental illness.

Witnesses and lawmakers at the hearing agreed on the constitutional right to own guns, but clashed over Obama's proposals, particularly the call for universal background checks for all gun buyers. That is seen as the most likely restriction to gain bipartisan support in a sharply divided Congress.

Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president and CEO of the powerful **gun rights** lobbying group, the National Rifle Association, gave no ground during the hearing and dismissed Obama's plan to close loopholes in the background check law.

"Let's be honest, background checks will never be universal because criminals will never submit to them," LaPierre said.

Federally licensed firearms dealers are required to run background checks for criminal records on gun buyers. But the government estimates that 40 percent of purchasers avoid screening by obtaining their guns from private sellers, including those at gun shows.

Kelly, whose wife retired as a Democratic member of the House of Representatives while recovering from her wounds, said tightening background checks for all gun buyers would be one of the most important ways to prevent guns from falling into the hands of criminals or the mentally ill.

"I mean, I can't think of something that would make our country safer than doing just that," Kelly testified, calling it the "common sense thing to do."

Obama's gun restrictions face a difficult challenge getting through the Democratic-led Senate and Republican-led House of Representatives, where many Republicans and some pro-gun Democrats have long opposed stronger gun-control laws.

'Awash in Guns'

LaPierre said the proposals would not reduce gun violence and called for more active prosecution of current laws and improved protection for schools, including armed guards.

"Law-abiding gun owners will not accept blame for the acts of violent or deranged criminals," LaPierre said. "We need to be honest about what works and what does not work. Proposals that would only serve to burden the law-abiding have failed in the past and they'll fail again."

Sen. Richard Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, sharply challenged LaPierre, saying the city of Chicago in his home state is "awash in guns." He cited the murder there on Tuesday of a 15-year-old girl who was an honor student and majorette and had marched in Obama's inaugural parade last week.

"Just a matter of days after the happiest day of her life, she's gone," Durbin said. "We have guns everywhere, and some believe the solution to this is more guns. I disagree."

As the hearing took place, three people were shot at a business complex in Phoenix, and police said one was in extremely critical condition in the latest U.S. mass shooting.

LaPierre and some Republicans on the panel said there has been a decline in the prosecution of **gun laws** since Obama took office in 2009. "It's a disgrace," he said.

While background checks are seen as the most likely common ground in the renewed **gun control** debate, Obama's plan to ban the sale of rapid-firing assault weapons like the one used in the Connecticut shootings faces much tougher opposition.

Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa, the top Republican on the committee, said the 1994 federal ban on assault weapons, which expired in 2004, did not stop mass shootings like the one at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999.

"We should not rush to pass legislation that will not reduce mass killings. Banning guns based on their appearance does not make sense," Grassley said. "I also question limitations on magazine capacity. Those can be circumvented by carrying multiple guns, as many killers have done."

Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, a Vermont Democrat, said the panel hoped to finish its work on gun control legislation by late February and send it to the Senate floor.

That could ignite a fierce legislative battle in Congress at a time when lawmakers are also wrestling with ambitious immigration reform proposals and urgent deadlines to reach agreement on federal spending.

The hearing featured a few sharp exchanges, including one between Leahy and LaPierre over the NRA's position on background checks. "I do not believe, the way the law is working now unfortunately, that it does any good to extend the law," LaPierre said.

Kelly, who along with Giffords recently founded Americans for Responsible Solutions, a group intended to combat gun violence, said the couple was in favor of gun ownership but against gun violence. "When dangerous people get dangerous guns, we are all the more vulnerable," he said.

Leahy made clear whatever measures would be considered to rein in gun violence, there would be no move to erode the fundamental right of Americans to own a gun, which is protected under the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Republican Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, a former federal prosecutor, agreed with the NRA that the government needs to better enforce existing gun laws.

"You have to prosecute," Sessions said.

Editing by Will Dunham.

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