

Guns on Campus: Bills would allow guns at college

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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) - John Woods sometimes sits in a classroom at the University of Texas and wonders what would happen if somebody walked in and started shooting.

In April 2007, he was a student at Virginia Tech when his girlfriend and several other people he knew there were gunned down in the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history. Thirty-two people died, plus the gunman. There were times when Woods thought that maybe he should get a gun. "Then I learned pretty fast that wouldn't solve anything," said Woods, who is now a graduate student at UT. "The idea that somebody could stop a school shooting with a gun is impossible. It's reactive, not preventative."

Today, Woods is among the leaders in a fight against bills in the Texas Legislature that would allow licensed concealed gun carriers to take their weapons to school. A public hearing is set for Monday in the House Public Safety Committee on one bill, sponsored by Rep. Joe Driver, a Garland Republican.

Supporters say the bills would protect the rights of those licensed to carry concealed weapons and help prevent a massacre on the scale of what happened at Virginia Tech and another shooting last year at Northern Illinois University, where five were killed and 18 wounded.

Texas issued 73,090 licenses in fiscal year 2008. The state requires applicants to pass a training course, pass a criminal background check and be at least 21 years old. Texas campuses are gun-free zones. "These are individuals who are already licensed and allowed to carry weapons. What marks the imaginary line of college campuses?" said Katie Kasprzak, a recent Texas State University graduate and spokeswoman for Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, a group that claims more than 37,000 members. If gunfire erupted on campus, "Would you rather sit and just take shot for shot or would you rather have a chance to fight back?" asked Kasprzak, who has a concealed weapons license.

State Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, sponsor of the Senate bill, said students, faculty and staff are "sitting ducks" if someone starts blasting. "I have no desire to wake up one morning and read in the newspaper, or hear on the radio, or watch on television a news report that 32 Texas college students were gunned down like sitting ducks by some deranged gunman," Wentworth said.

Opponents say that if guns are allowed on campus, students and faculty will live in fear of classmates and colleagues, not knowing who might pull a gun over a drunken dorm argument or a poor grade. According to the Brady Campaign Against Gun Violence, similar bills have been filed in 18 states since 2008 and all have failed, although lawmakers in a few states are trying again.

Texas is one of seven states currently considering legislation. "We hope Texas will serve as a leader and have a domino effect," Kasprzak said. Of the 150 House members, 70 have signed on in support of Drivers' bill. In the Senate, 12 of 31 senators signed in support of Wentworth's bill. The idea has met stiff opposition at the University of Texas, which has its own history of shooting violence. Charles Whitman's 1966 rifle attack from the top of the university tower killed 16 people and wounded dozens more. It was the worst campus shooting until the Virginia Tech bloodbath.

The UT student government, the graduate student assembly and the faculty advisory council have all passed resolutions against the campus guns bills. "It's a recipe for disaster," said Brian Malte, state legislation and politics director for the Brady Campaign. Woods has helped lead the charge against the bills and filed the student government resolution opposing them.

Woods, who wore a maroon "Virginia Tech Class of 2007" T-shirt during an interview, said he hasn't heard from any survivor of the Virginia Tech shooting who supports guns on campus. He figures a classroom shooting would be too sudden to stop, even if a student or teacher had a gun. "Everything happens too quickly," Woods said. "You either play dead or you are dead."