

Newtown Families Hope Massacre Helps In Transforming Nation

BY SUSAN HAIGH
Associated Press

NEWTOWN, Conn. — Newtown officials and parents of children killed in last month's elementary school massacre called on lawmakers Wednesday to turn the tragedy into "the moment of transformation" by banning high-powered, military-style rifles and high-capacity magazines while providing better care to the mentally ill and requiring more background checks for gun owners.

Several hundred residents, many wearing stickers urging more gun control measures, attended a public hearing held Wednesday night in the wake of the Dec. 14 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School that left 20 first-graders and six educators dead. State lawmakers are considering possible changes to laws and policies affecting guns, mental health and school safety.

Bill Sherlach, whose wife, Mary, a school psychologist, died in the rampage, said that he respects the Second Amendment but that it was written in a long-ago era where armaments were different.

"I have no idea how long it took to reload and fire a musket," he said. "I do know that the number of shots fired in the Sandy Hook Elementary School in those few short minutes is almost incomprehensible, even in today's modern age."

Unlike a legislative subcommittee hearing held Monday at the Legislative Office Building in Hartford on gun laws, which lasted hours into the night and attracted hundreds of gun rights activists statewide, the crowd at Newtown High School on Wednesday was overwhelmingly in favor of gun control.

"Make this the time that change happens. Don't give up because it's too hard or too difficult. Make a promise to honor the lives lost at Sandy Hook and elsewhere in America by turning this tragedy into the moment of transformation that benefits us all," said Nicole Hockley. Her 6-year-old son, Dylan, was among those killed by 20-year-old Adam Lanza, who fatally shot his mother in their home before driving to the school to carry out the massacre and committing suicide.

David Wheeler, whose 6-year-old son, Benjamin, was also killed, said a more comprehensive system of identifying and monitoring individuals with mental distress needs to be created.

"That a person with these problems could live in a home where he had access to among the most powerful firearms available to non-military personnel is unacceptable," he said. "It doesn't matter to whom these weapons were registered. It doesn't matter if they were purchased legally. What matters is that it was far too easy for another mentally unbalanced, suicidal person who had violent obsessions to have easy access to unreasonably powerful weapons."

But Newtown resident Casey Khan warned that further restrictions on gun rights leave "good and lawful citizens at risk." While one of the few to speak in favor of gun rights, Khan still received applause from some in the audience.

Another resident, Mike Collins, said reducing the number of cartridges creates a vulnerability for the shooter, who has to reload, and for the people trying to defend themselves.

"I don't want to be out-gunned in a situation that I cannot walk or run away from," he said.

In response to calls from gun enthusiasts who've urged lawmakers against infringing on their Second Amendment rights, Newtown Police Chief Michael Kehoe told the lawmakers "this sacrifice is necessary and certainly warranted." Kehoe spoke of the need to reduce easy access to weapons of mass murder.

Wednesday's public hearing was organized by the General Assembly's task force on gun violence prevention and children's safety. Lawmakers hope to vote on a package of new measures around the end of February.

More details of the shooting were revealed at the hearing.

Susie Ehrens spoke of how her daughter, Emma, escaped from Sandy Hook with a group of other first-graders when the shooter paused. Emma, she said, saw her friends and teacher slaughtered before she ran past lifeless bodies and a half a mile down the road.

"The fact that my daughter survived and others didn't haunts me. That a spot where they were standing at that moment decided their fate that day, when evil (that) could have been stopped walked into their classrooms," Ehrens said.

Mary Ann Jacob, a Sandy Hook teacher, recalled hearing

"hundreds of hundreds of gunshots that seemed to last forever" and crawling across the floor with 18 children to hide from the shooter.

Some in the audience didn't testify but said they felt it was important to attend.

Trish Keil and her twin sister, Helen Malyszka, two music teachers in Sandy Hook who knew many of the slain children, said they believe the tragedy will lead to change and won't be forgotten. Both support more gun control measures.

"I think it happened in Newtown for a reason and I think there is going to be major change because Newtown will not stand by and let this go," Keil said. "This is just, it's too horrific. When it's starting to affect our children, something has to be done and it's going to change."

Obama Asks For A Comprehensive Immigration Deal Within 6 Months

BY JOSH LEDERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama says he's looking for immigration reform to be completed within six months.

Obama said a deal should certainly be attainable this year, but he wants one even sooner. He said that politics, not technical issues, are standing in the way.

"I can guarantee that I will put everything I have behind it," Obama said in an interview with Telemundo, one of two he conducted Wednesday with Spanish-language television networks.

A group of senators, both Democrats and Republicans, has agreed on a framework for comprehensive immigration reform, including a path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants already in the country. In the Republican-controlled House, another group of

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BARACK OBAMA

lawmakers is working on its own proposal.

Obama is promoting his own set of principles similar to those included in the Senate plan, but he has not been directly involved in the Senate's negotiations — perhaps a sign he recognizes that too much involvement by the Democratic president could make it harder for Republican lawmakers to sign on.

But Obama said he is open to meeting privately or publicly with members of either party, including Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, a potential 2016 presidential candidate.

"I would be pleased to meet

with anyone, anytime, anyplace," Obama said.

In a separate interview with Univision, Obama said the bill should make clear that a pathway to citizenship "is real and not just a fantasy for the future." Rubio is among lawmakers pushing for improvements on border security before citizenship would be granted, which has emerged as one likely sticking point between the Senate group and the White House. Obama said his administration has and will continue to take steps to tighten the border.

"What we don't want is to create some vague prospect in the future that somehow comprehensive immigration reform that includes a pathway to citizenship will happen, you know, manana," he said, using the Spanish word for "tomorrow." "We want to make sure that we're very clear that this legislation provides a real pathway."



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