



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senate Committee on Insurance, Financial Services, Government Oversight and Courts

FROM: Kim Vercauteren, Executive Director 

DATE: February 20, 2020

RE: SB 822, Concealed Weapons in Places of Worship

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), I wish to express our opposition to Senate Bill 822. This bill allows a person who has a concealed carry license to bring a firearm into a place of worship, even if that place of worship is located on school grounds.

While the WCC acknowledges that a house of worship retains the option to post restrictions on the carrying of firearms on its ground or in its buildings, we oppose SB 822 for several reasons. First, if SB 822 were to pass, the number of handguns present on school grounds and in school zones would likely increase. This proliferation of guns is a cause for concern, not because it will likely unleash a wave of intentional violence, but because a greater prevalence of guns is associated with greater numbers of accidental or unintentional firearm injuries and deaths.

Under SB 822, individuals would be able to enter school grounds, including a worship facility, with a concealed weapon. While a school near a church may post firearms restrictions on buildings and grounds, this does not prevent guns from being carried in unposted areas that may include shared common areas such as parking lots, community rooms, and entrances. Additionally, SB 822 does not restrict carrying to times when a worship site is in use and may include instances when both a school and worship site are open, and in some instances, connected.

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 to do so. In other words, if a school and worship site want 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.

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 also cannot invoke sovereign immunity or take advantage of statutory limits on damages should some incident occur.

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The same reasons that have justified banning concealed weapons from schools apply equally to other places that house vulnerable populations. Like schools, churches and buildings used for religious purposes, hospitals, day care centers, Catholic Charities agencies, etc., 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. As in the past, we ask that the state not place an unreasonable burden on places of worship and other institutions opposed to the presence of weapons.

Lastly, the very presence of concealed weapons undercuts one of the primary objectives of religious institutions, namely the fostering of peaceful relations within the family and society. Institutions which object on moral grounds to the presence of firearms should be recognized as gun-free zones. Several other states that permit concealed weapons do exempt buildings used for religious purposes. Any law adopted in Wisconsin should do the same.

We urge you to oppose SB 822. Thank you.