



## 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

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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.