

Is gun control the answer?

Officials: Focusing on mental health may be key solution

Courier & Press Staff

By the end of the day Tuesday, Terry Eickhoff's cordless phone was out of juice from too much use.

Eickhoff's Red Ghost Gun Shop in northwestern Vanderburgh County was nonstop busy Tuesday afternoon with customers buying guns and ammunition. Eickhoff said it had been so since the weekend.

Between calling the FBI for background checks on every potential firearm purchaser and fielding incoming customer calls, Eickhoff had spent a lot of time on the phone.

"It is way beyond anything I've seen in 17 years (of running the store). Even Columbine didn't have this kind of impact," Eickhoff said.

Many customers, Eickhoff said, are buying now because they fear tighter gun-control laws are coming.

Similar gun-purchasing sprees were seen across the country last week as funerals were held daily for some of the 20 children and six adults killed Dec. 14 at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn. The debate over gun rights simmered as the days passed. President Obama announced a commission that is certain to recommend tighter gun control restrictions, followed by a call by the National Rifle Association for armed guards in all schools.

Closer to home, Evansville Mayor Lloyd Winnecke met with EVSC Superintendent David Smith on Wednesday to discuss security enhancements and the formation of a uniform emergency protocol.

Rev. Mitch Gieselman grew up in a family of gun owners and hunters, and he says he is "not a big advocate of messing with anyone's Second Amendment rights." But as a minister at Aldersgate United Methodist Church, he is part of a religious denomination that has taken a strong stand against gun violence.

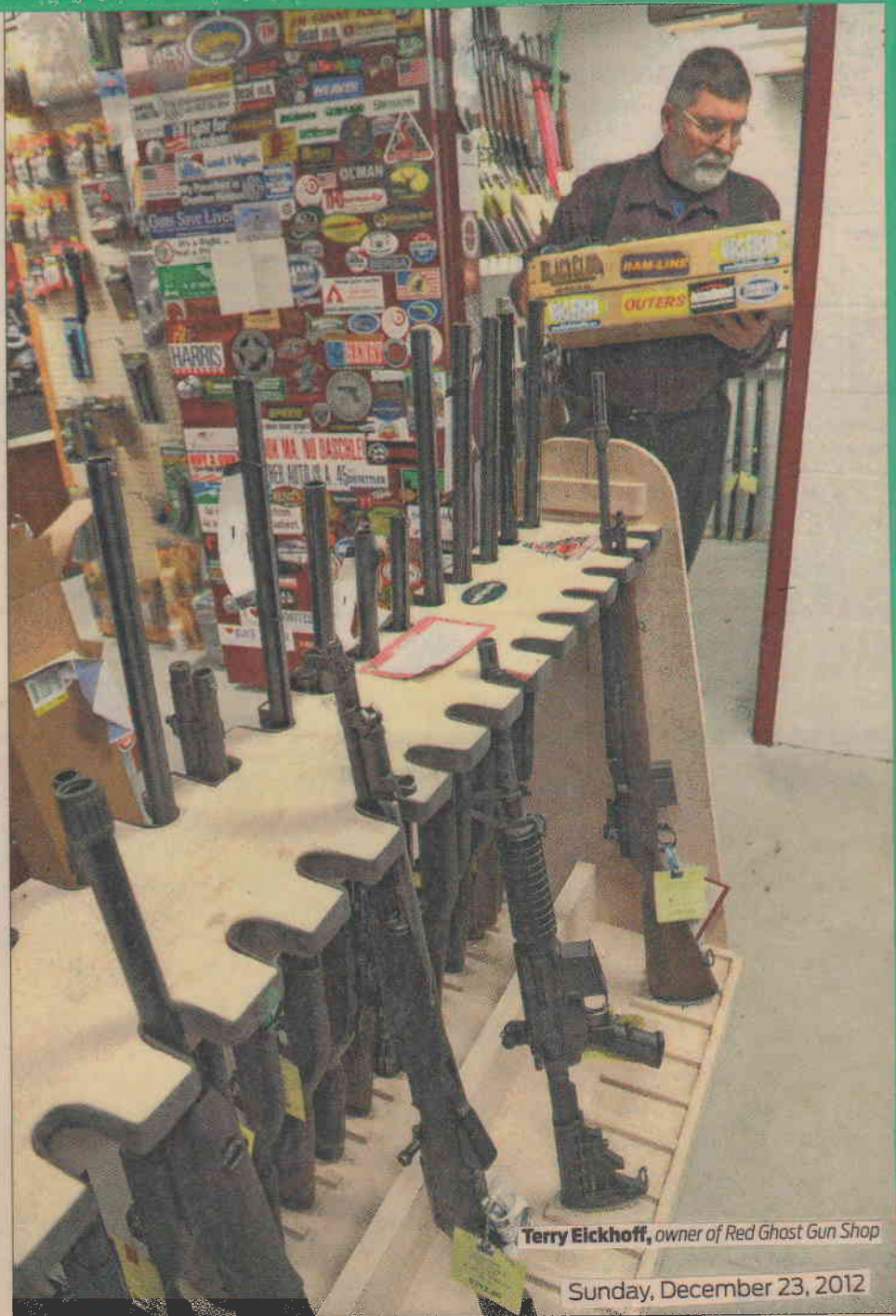
"Something has to give," he said. "We need to do something radically different."

Exactly what that change looks like is complex and uncertain at this stage of the ensuing national conversation. For some it involves bet-

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Terry Eickhoff, owner of Red Ghost Gun Shop

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JASON CLARK / COURIER & PRESS

Terry Eickhoff, owner of Red Ghost Gun Shop in Vanderburgh County, transfers pistols to put on display for customers while opening his shop Thursday. Eickhoff has owned the shop 17 years.

“Criminals don't abide by the laws, no matter what they are. ... My advice to lawmakers is to back off, back up. Wait until the emotion's gone.”

GUNS from 1A

ter school security. There is need for greater access to health care for those with mental health issues, some said. Restricting access to guns won't solve the problem, others said.

Courier & Press reporters last week spoke with various members of the community about gun control in the wake of Sandy Hook.

POSEY COUNTY SHERIFF GREG OETH

Parents were calling Posey County Sheriff Greg Oeth on Monday, his first day back at work after the Newtown school shootings.

"I took probably 10 calls from parents wondering why there aren't officers in all the schools," he said.

It was a question Oeth said he couldn't answer. Only the North Posey School District has an assigned school officer, he said.

Security in public buildings and schools, like other functions of law enforcement, has to be weighed against other needs when determining how to use the existing resources, he said.

A retired Indiana State Police crime scene investigator, Oeth said he has seen "the worst of the worst" in his 33-year law enforcement career. It has left him with no easy answers to the issue of gun control.

"It is a constant issue on anyone in law enforcement administration's mind," he said. "In my opinion, we are a society that has a constitutional right to have firearms. They are in society now. The barn door is open. The problem has become, how do we legislate them. If controls are enacted on existing firearms, I don't know if government has the resources to do that."

Oeth said he believes the best answer is to concentrate on identifying people who shouldn't have weapons and keeping them from having them.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON CLARK / COURIER & PRESS

A wide range of rifles, pistols and ammunition is available at the Red Ghost Gun Shop in Vanderburgh County. Owner Terry Eickhoff said phone calls about buying firearms have skyrocketed since the Newtown, Conn., school shooting.

TERRY EICKHOFF, OWNER OF RED GHOST GUN SHOP

Eickhoff said he does not believe additional restrictions are the answer to the problem of gun violence.

"Criminals don't abide by the laws, no matter what they are," Eickhoff said.

As an example: Background checks. Over nearly 17 years as a gun-shop owner, Eickhoff said he's only had a handful of would-be purchasers fail to pass a background check.

"Very, very, very few unlawful people come to gun stores to buy guns," he said.

What would be effective to curb gun violence, Eickhoff believes, is keeping convicted criminals behind bars.

That might include handing out longer sentences upon conviction, he said, and/or making sure criminals remain in prison for the full length of their sentences.

"It should be criminal control, not gun control."



A wide range of rifles, pistols and ammunition is displayed at the Red Ghost Gun Shop in Vanderburgh County. Background checks are made on every potential firearm buyer.

REV. MITCH GIESELMAN

The issue is complex and difficult, Gieselman acknowledges. If you truly want to reduce gun violence, he believes, you also have to address poverty, drug culture, mental health issues, perhaps, violent movies and video games.

And simply toughening the gun laws, he said, isn't likely to be the solution.

In 2000, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church — the organization's highest policy-setting body — passed a resolution on the topic. That resolution, which was reaffirmed in 2008 and again this year, focuses on gun violence against children and youth as an issue of special concern.

That resolution calls on the denomination to take a variety of actions ranging from supporting "strong government regulation on the sale and purchase of guns" and a ban on automatic weapons, working toward "the reduction of guns in society especially hand guns and assault weapons," promoting gun safety education and discouraging the glorification of violence in entertainment,

Gieselman, pastor of Aldersgate United Methodist Church on Evansville's East Side, said he is "basically in harmony with the statement of my denomination."

Gun violence is a problem Americans must address, Gieselman believes.

Though guns and gun rights are an emotional topic, Gieselman said he's optimistic Americans can come together on the issue.

"Obviously we're not all in agreement on this, but it doesn't have to be 'us vs. them,'" Gieselman said, adding that prayer can help lead people to wise decisions. "We just need to talk rationally with one another and not assume that someone with whom we disagree is the enemy."

VANDERBURGH COUNTY PROSECUTOR NICK HERMANN

"Guns are a tool. Specifically, they are a tool that can be used as a weapon. The problem comes when people get guns who shouldn't have them," said Vanderburgh County Prosecutor Nick Hermann. "At some point a person's actions can show they no longer need to have them."

Hermann noted that his office has filed a lot of felon in possession of a handgun cases. Indiana law makes firearm possession by serious violent felons a Class B felony crime punishable by a 6- to 20-year prison sentence. It is a lesser crime, a Class A misdemeanor, for a person convicted of domestic battery to possess a gun.

Often times those cases end up prosecuted in federal court where the sentences are more severe, he said. The prosecutor's

office maintains a liaison with the U.S. Attorney's Office to work on such cases.

"The problem with gun laws is they affect the good people as well as criminals," Hermann said.

He noted that it can be argued the creation of gun-free zones in certain public locations can leave the people who frequent those places potentially defenseless.

"Sometimes you end up restricting gun access from good people who would otherwise protect people," he said.

What may get lost in the gun control debate, Hermann said, are school safety issues such as whether or not police officers should be stationed in schools.

Another area of concern, he said, is the issue of mental health and how it relates to issues such as law enforcement.

"Where the dialogue is missing is on mental health," he said.

EVANSVILLE VANDERBURGH SCHOOL CORP. SUPERINTENDENT DAVID SMITH

This type of senseless attack and loss is a difficult subject to discuss because, EVSC Superintendent David Smith said, there are no acceptable answers for why something like this happens.

"We all understand why there is a cry for immediate action as this allows us to think that we are once again in control," Smith said. "At times like this our thoughts tend to be more emotionally focused, even though we know as parents we cannot protect our children 100 percent of the time — be it at school, a movie theater or a mall. But our children's well-being is still everyone's heartfelt desire."

According to the United States Department of Education, Smith said schools continue to be among the safest places for children. He said it's important to be proactive and reflective when an incident like this occurs, to better EVSC's security systems.

The EVSC won't discuss safety and security plans because individuals with bad intent "could use that information," Smith said. He said procedures are in place with trained teams in every building in the corporation.

"Perhaps this tragedy will become the catalyst necessary to finally provide treatment for mental illness in a manner that is beneficial to all involved," he said.

EVANSVILLE VANDERBURGH SCHOOL CORP. SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT MICHAEL DUCKWORTH

The safety and security of EVSC students should be the No. 1 priority, according to EVSC school board President Michael Duckworth, because learning or extra curricular activities can't be utilized until it's ensured the kids are safe in the schools.

As a school Corp., Duckworth said you wonder how you can continue to work to prevent these kinds of things from happening in our community.

"And it's a continual work in progress because I guess the bottom line is, if someone is going to go to those limits and not value their own life, there's not much you can do to deter someone from causing that kind of carnage," he said.

A constant working relationship between local law enforcement agencies is valuable, and Duckworth said that does exist in Evansville.

He commented on similar situations in the past, Columbine, Virginia Tech and Paducah, Ky., saying these areas are pretty much middle class environments, an everyday setting for a school district that was disrupted because someone has mental problems.

"Someone is angered, someone is fed up with how they've been treated," he said. "I think the other side of this is stepping back and looking at our students and our community and see who exhibits these kinds of behaviors that are telltale signs that this may be in their future."

WARRICK COUNTY SCHOOL CORP. SUPERINTENDENT BRAD SCHNEIDER

On top of having the proper resources available for students if they feel they need someone to talk to, Warrick County School Corp. Superintendent Brad Schneider said the most important thing that can be provided right now is as close to a normal school day as possible for the kids.

"We kind of take our cue from the kids. If they've got questions, we try to have a discussion and reassure the kids that they are safe," Schneider said.

He said several Warrick County schools sent information home with students offering parents advice on how to talk to their children about the situation and to let them express their opinions and thoughts. And schools are constantly revising and practicing safety plans, he added.

"It's a good time to remind kids and make sure they understand the plan and what to do," he said. "And when we do have a drill, to practice it like it's for real."

If a student overhears a peer make a questionable comment about bringing a weapon to school or threatening to harm another person, that student needs to understand the importance of reporting the incident to a trusted adult so it can be thoroughly investigated.

"I think a lot of acts of school violence, the perpetrators actually tell someone or make a threat that they're going to do something," Schneider said. "So that's our opportunity maybe to intervene and prevent someone from being attacked or beat up or bringing a weapon to school."

STATE SEN. JIM TOMES

"First and foremost in these kind of horrific tragedies, all these young lives lost, it's heart-wrenching for me and for all parents across the country," said Tomes, a Wadesville Republican and a longtime advocate for gun-owner rights.

"Emotion is a human attribute that we have that helps us work through these terrible situations. Right now the dynamic we have is emotions facing off with logic. Emotions are something we're all dealing with. Logically, if we want to face the problems we deal with in this country ... don't zero in on inanimate objects."

Tomes said he would advocate legislation enabling school personnel to be armed in classrooms if they wish.

He said having one police officer stationed in a school is not sufficient.

"I'm getting emails from teachers (in support of such a bill). They would receive training and certification and periodic training throughout the years to understand the responsibilities and legalities."

Shortly after making the statement, Tomes learned state law that establishes gun-free zones exempts any school employee authorized by a school "to act as a security guard, perform or participate in a school function, or participate in any other activity authorized by a school."

"If something happens in that classroom, that teacher will truly be the first responder. That teacher would be there at the moment something would happen, and we wouldn't lose precious minutes. I would not mandate it, but any teacher and administration who would like the ability to safeguard our children (should be able to)."

"I would ask parents to think for themselves if this is something to be considered. Washington, D.C., I don't know what they will do. But I would hope the states would think about new solutions. All the sophisticated lock systems in the world wouldn't prevent someone from coming in school windows. Banning a certain type of gun doesn't work, never will work."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON CLARK / COURIER & PRESS

Terry Eickhoff, owner of Red Ghost Gun Shop in Vanderburgh County, stays busy answering phone calls and putting guns on display while opening his shop on Thursday.



A wide range of ammunition is available at the Red Ghost Gun Shop in Vanderburgh County. Terry Eickhoff has owned the Red Ghost Gun Shop for 17 years.

A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.

Full text of the second amendment

U.S. REP. LARRY BUCSHON, R-IND.

U.S. Rep. Larry Bucshon, 8th District, said policymakers can effect positive change not by focusing on the physical implements of destruction wrought by mentally ill individuals but by pursuing answers to larger, underlying societal issues that help explain their crimes.

Bucshon's view is such deeper issues trump gun control, which he called demonstrably ineffective.

"The conversation needs to be directed at why our society is violent and addressing the issues with how we deal with mental illness, how we deal with our drug problem and our poor economic situation in some of our communities," said the congressman, a gun-rights supporter.

"We have to address the root cause of why we have a violent society," Bucshon said, noting he has four children of his own, including an 8-year-old.

There are larger questions as well about access to the health care system for people with mental health issues, said Bucshon, a heart surgeon before his election to Congress.

The Newburgh resident said family members of mentally ill individuals "don't have much recourse for helping them" because of involuntary commitment statutes that limit detention to 72 hours.

A court's determination that an individual is "mentally ill and either dangerous or gravely disabled" can result in lengthier commitments, but it is a process.

"There aren't a lot of places for those people to access the health care system other than through emergency rooms when they're in acute crisis," Bucshon said.

INDIANA STATE POLICE

The Indiana State Police determine whether handgun licenses should be granted to individuals who have been treated for psychiatric health care or emotional or mental illness.

"Submit documentation and or a recommendation from the treating mental health professional or treatment center," the agency's website instructs such individuals.

"The normal practice is for the applicant to sign a release for the mental health records, and have the treating facility forward them to the Indiana State Police for review. After review of the complete records, we are usually able to make a determination without further input from the applicant."

Officially, handgun licenses are issued by the ISP's superintendent, the agency's chief.

But the actual examination of mental health medical records generated by treating doctors and facilities is done by Lt. Peter Wood, an ISP staff attorney, and agency Records Division Commander Major Doug Shelton.

Wood said he and Shelton examine reports filed by doctors and treating facilities looking for indications that an individual has a propensity for violence or is otherwise emotionally unstable.

"It could be a letter from the doctor explaining the person's mental health issues or lack thereof, or it could be day-to-day treatment records over the course of a year or over the course of a short period of time, depending on the nature and the extent of the treatment," he said.

On that basis, Wood said, some individuals have been rejected for handgun licenses — but ISP cannot say how many without combing through drafts of individual case files.

Given the wide range of mental health issues — anything from paranoid schizophrenia to mild depression — the two officers sometimes decide they need more information to

make a recommendation to the ISP superintendent.

"We schedule (permit application with mental health treatment histories) for an administrative law hearing in an attempt to elicit that information or clarify those issues then," Wood said.

"What we like to have (in the hearing) is for a mental health professional to say, 'I reviewed the records, and nothing there appears to give an indication of mental instability or propensity for violence,' or documentation of it."

But some doctors are not comfortable making such declarations, so Wood and Shelton make recommendations themselves.

The officers have their own experience as law enforcement officials, the required medical reports, recommendations from local law enforcement agencies to which applicants also must apply — plus a state law — to guide them.

The section of the Indiana Code titled, "Weapons and instruments of violence" includes a lengthy list of qualifications for carrying a firearms license under the heading, "proper person."

Among the qualifications is the language: "does not have documented evidence which would give rise to a reasonable belief that the person has a propensity for violent or emotionally unstable conduct."

"It's one of those, 'You know it when you see it,' type things," Wood said. "We gather all this information and then view it through the lens of our experience as well as the recommendations and the opinions of the other police officers involved in the process, and then make an educated decision based on all available information."

U.S. SEN.-ELECT JOE DONNELLY, D-IND.

Despite his A rating from the National Rifle Association and history of strong support for gun rights, Democratic U.S. Sen.-elect Joe Donnelly has indicated he is open to new gun control measures.

"Now is the time to work together to make sure this never happens again. All parties must come to the table as we determine the appropriate action to address this extremely concerning problem of senseless violence," Donnelly said in a statement.

Donnelly told CNN that he is open to legislation that would tighten gun laws.

"You know, I'm a Dad, too. My kids are a little older now, but I think of when they were 6 and 7 years old, and I think we have a responsibility to make sure this never happens again," he told the network.

When CNN asked Donnelly whether he would support an effort by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., to ban assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition, he said that "everybody's willing to listen and be part of that discussion."

U.S. SEN. DAN COATS, R-IND.

Republican U.S. Sen. Dan Coats said as lawmakers consider how to prevent future school shootings, the debate should be a broad one that includes a look at cultural issues and mental illness.

"I support Second Amendment rights for law-abiding citizens," Coats said in a statement.

"While laws alone cannot eliminate all acts of violence from this world, our county needs to have a much larger discussion on the direction of our culture, how we deal with mental illness and how we can better protect our children. Any policy debate we have in the coming weeks should focus on how we can keep our children safe."

Coats took heat in the 2010 Republican U.S. Senate primary for his votes in the 1990s in favor of a semi-automatic firearms ban and a measure that required a background check for handgun purchasers.

EVANSVILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT CHIEF BILLY BOLIN

While he stressed the importance of responsibility and safety for those who choose to own a gun, Evansville Police Department Chief Billy Bolin said calls to heavily restrict firearms in the wake of the Sandy Hook shooting are a knee-jerk reaction.

Instead, he said the focus coming out of the tragedy should be more on school safety procedures. Bolin said the department has had a long-standing relationship with the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corp. as well as the city's private schools, aimed at ensuring students are safe when they go to school.

But Bolin also acknowledged the recent shooting in Newtown, Conn., has brought school safety back to the forefront.

"A thing like Sandy Hook, it just changes the game," he said. "We responded well to Columbine, but you don't think you're going to have sick people are going to attack little innocent kids."

He said his goal, though basically impossible right now, would be to get a uniformed officer into every school building in the city, public or private.

"I think that is about the No. 1 thing that we can do to protect our kids."

Currently, the department has five officers assigned to schools and two more officers assigned to school safety responsibilities. He also said he is exploring the possibility of implementing a volunteer reserve school corps whose members would be subject to the same training as regular officers.

"I think people are doing a good job, but I think we all can do a better job," said Bolin, whose three children attend EVSC schools.

Though he urged gun owners to go through some sort of education course, Bolin said he understands a person's desire to own a weapon for personal protection, saying that a well-trained gun owner could provide the first line of defense during a dangerous situation.

In addition, Bolin said he does not believe stricter gun control would have much of an impact.

"If we make guns illegal, all the bad people are still going to have them, and they'll still be able to get them. I'm not saying I'm for or against, but I don't think it helps the problem."

VANDERBURGH COUNTY SHERIFF ERIC WILLIAMS

Vanderburgh County Sheriff Eric Williams said his office will continue to enforce the gun laws however they are dictated by state, federal and local officials.

However, he said the shooting in Newtown, Conn., has given officials the opportunity to have "meaningful discussion" about current firearm regulations. Any sort of discussion, Williams said, should include both gun proponents and those who want stricter firearm regulations as well as mental health experts and community leaders.

"We need to have a lot of people there discussing about how we get guns, how easy it is to get guns, how we monitor who has those guns, and what we do with those folks who abuse the use of those who misuse those guns."

Williams said he will do what he can to make sure such conversation takes place, but did not offer any specific proposals, noting local officials have more control over the school safety than firearm regulation.

Though he said local schools and law enforcement agencies are "at or ahead of the curve," when it comes to school safety, more needs to be done, he said.

Williams called properly addressing the threat of school violence, law enforcement's version of the problems in the 1950s when officials started aggressively tackling the issue of fire safety in schools.

"We as a country took that very, very seriously. We designed schools around fire safety, Williams said. "We drilled fire safety. We practiced fire safety. Everybody knows how to get out of a school when there's a fire, and we designed them so they're easy to get out of."

Williams called having an armed law enforcement officer in every school a good goal, but reinforced the need to train students what to do in such a situation.

"The folks inside those schools, the kids, they need to know what to do, they need to know how to do it, and they need to know when to do it."

Staff Writers Megan Erbacher, Susan Orr, John Martin, Eric Bradfer, Richard Gootee, Thomas B. Langhorne and Mark Wilson contributed to this report.