Local officials hopeful that Conn. tragedy will bring positive action

By Eric Lindquist
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As people across the country mourn along with the residents of Newtown, Conn., over the nation's latest mass shooting, some Chippewa Valley officials have joined the rising chorus calling for action to stop the rash of senseless killings.

While many preventive measures — banning particularly lethal weapons, improving school security, eliminating exceptions to laws requiring background checks for gun buyers — have been talked about before, several officials believe the reaction to the Dec. 14 slayings of 20 elementary school children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School may be enduring enough to bring about real change.

"I think there is a window of opportunity here to use this tragedy to do some good," Eau Claire police Chief Jerry Matysik said. "The reason this time could be different is that these victims were such young, innocent children. It really hits home for every parent and grandparent out there."

While the momentum to do something — anything — to stop such mass shootings has generally stalled after the initial outcry in the past, UW-Eau Claire associate professor of criminal justice Justin Patchin also said he believes this time could be different.

"I believe something will happen in response to this incident," Patchin said. "Whether it is substantive or symbolic remains to be seen."

Patchin and Matysik, both gun owners, said they think reasonable limitations on certain kinds of weapons make sense.

"I'm a hunter, I own guns and I respect the heritage and tradition of hunting in Wisconsin, but I think there are a lot of people like me who think we could do without some of these weapons," Patchin said. "Is it really necessary to have assault rifles and high-capacity magazines?"

Matysik agreed that renewing the ban on military-style assault weapons that expired in 2004, outlawing high-capacity magazines that enable mass shooters to kill more people without reloading
and closing loopholes that allow people to avoid background checks by buying firearms at gun shows or over the Internet need to be part of the discussion.

The assault weapons ban, which was in effect for 10 years, "didn't interrupt sportsmen and their pursuit of game or the ability of people to protect their homes," Matysik said, adding, "I didn't see any downside to having that ban in place."

**Resistance movement**

But any restrictions on weapons are bound to meet enormous resistance from the powerful gun lobby and gun rights activists, who argue the focus of prevention efforts should be on the people who commit the crimes instead of the tools they use to carry out their actions.

The battle lines were made clear Friday when National Rifle Association leaders, after a week of self-imposed silence, reiterated their opposition to new proposals to restrict firearms. Instead, the organization proposed placing armed guards in all schools to deter violence.

Steve Lauer, owner of gun manufacturer Lauer Custom Weaponry in Lake Hallie, said he would reject any new restrictions on guns and sees any such efforts as an assault on Second Amendment rights.

"You can't ban guns in America," Lauer said. "All you can do is ban certain features, and that does nothing at all. Period."

Lauer maintained the AR-15 semiautomatic rifle — a version of which his company makes and the model used in the Connecticut shooting, the Colorado movie theater rampage in July and a shopping mall shooting this month in Portland, Ore. — is frequently used by hunters and target shooters. It is particularly popular with hunters aiming for moving targets such as ducks, coyotes or deer moving after a drive, he said.

The AR-15, which Lauer described as "America's gun," also is a lot of fun to shoot, he added.

Lauer scoffed at the idea that gun control could be effective at reducing violence: "There are 300 million to 500 million guns in this country, and you're going to somehow affect that with some kind of legislation."

Though state Rep. Chris Danou, D-Trempealeau, said there is no doubt that automatic and semiautomatic weapons have the potential to cause more harm in a short time than other guns, he acknowledged concerns that "the cat may already be out of the bag."
"That's the challenge of gun control in the United States. There's already so many guns out there," Danou said.

**Officers in school**

That's why Danou said he hopes to focus his legislative attention on something he knows can improve safety: adding more school resource police officers in schools.

As an Onalaska police officer before getting elected to the Assembly in 2008, Danou served for four years as a school liaison officer and believes such positions are "one of the most effective ways to prevent school violence."

Though funding may be an issue, Danou hopes to find a Republican partner to introduce legislation next session to get school officers in all 426 state school districts. Most large districts already have such officers, so the legislation would primarily benefit smaller districts, many of which operate out of one building.

"If we were going to take a simple, immediate step — because gun control and mental health issues are so complex — I think this is something we could do that would improve safety and wouldn't be terribly controversial," he said.

Not only does a uniformed officer have a deterrent effect on anyone thinking of carrying out a violent act at a school, but such officers develop relationships with kids and thus often are able to intervene before something bad happens, said Danou, who recalled confronting students within minutes of learning about a threat or someone carrying a realistic-looking toy gun.

And in the unfortunate event that someone does present a threat at a school, at least the officers would be on site and trained to respond immediately, he added.

Matysik, noting that Eau Claire public high schools and middle schools all have school resource officers, agreed the positions are one line of defense against school violence.

However, Matysik said, mass shootings are a complex problem that no simple solution will fix.

The response will require a multifaceted approach that the police chief believes, in addition to gun control measures, should involve improving access to mental health services; limiting exposure to violent video games, TV and movies; and a redoubling of efforts by parents to instill strong values in children.
"But just because no simple solution will immediately eliminate this problem doesn't mean we shouldn't try," Matysik said. "We should do whatever we can to reduce it. We can do better."

Open to ideas

Danou and state Rep. Kathy Bernier, R-Lake Hallie, both said they would be open to discussing any ideas that might prevent future mass shootings in Wisconsin, which made national news in August when a gunman killed six people before turning the gun on himself at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek.

However, Bernier, a gun owner who hunts and holds a concealed carry permit, cautioned that she doesn't want to see knee-jerk reactions that don't get to the root of the problem.

While she didn't rule out anything, Bernier suggested she isn't inclined to support bans on certain guns.

"It's the non-law-abiding citizens that get a hold of them, and they will more than likely get a hold of them even if they are banned," she said.

Still, Danou said public pressure in response to the horrific details of the Connecticut slayings may be strong enough to cause some legislators to reconsider entrenched positions.

"Maybe we are finally at a tipping point with gun issues and gun crime," Danou said, noting that drunken driving was tolerated for years before interest groups and the public finally converged to force a crackdown.

Lauer, however, suggested more guns, rather than fewer, would make people safer from mass shootings. He went so far as to suggest that schools and churches become targets because they often are designated as gun-free zones and perpetrators know they won't meet armed resistance.

"Kids in these gun-free zones are like sitting ducks for these nut jobs," Lauer said, pointing out that many mass shooters are found to be mentally ill and taking medications to treat their condition.

Instead of focusing on gun control, he said, "We should start looking at that kind of stuff. That's where the real problem is."

Mental health concerns
Jacalyn Weissenburger, a former school psychologist who now is associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at UW-Stout, advocated educating parents, teachers and others about danger signs in children, especially those with mental health problems.

She recalled intervening in cases in Iowa schools involving a student plotting to kill his stepmother and another who had plans to kill some of his teachers.

"Some of these kids are just really disturbed," Weissenburger said.

In addition to calling for more resources to help students with mental health issues and being particularly cautious about limiting their access to weapons, Weissenburger said parents and school staff should be on the alert for students who are preoccupied with guns or violent video games, talk about killing someone, repeatedly set fires, torture animals or write stories or draw pictures about violence. Such warning signs should be reported to authorities immediately, she said.

"The bottom line is when you see children who are collecting gun magazines or spending hours playing violent video games to the extent that they really are limiting their interaction with friends and family ... then parents and mental health professionals in schools and whoever else notices need to take some kind of action," she said.

While Weissenburger recognizes the goal is to balance the civil rights of the mentally ill with the safety of the general public, she said she fears society may have "overcorrected" in pushing to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill beginning in the 1950s, adding, "There are some people who really shouldn't be at large."

Still, Matysik emphasized that only a small percentage of people with mental illness are prone to violence.

**Hard to identify**

And trying to identify someone capable of large-scale violence is mostly futile, said Michael Caldwell, a UW-Madison lecturer in psychology who studies psychopathy.

Short of someone making a threat that they're going to hurt others, there's not much that would accurately predict such violent behavior, he said.

"It's real unusual that you could see it coming," Caldwell said. "Even if there were some subtle indications that this guy had some mental-health issues or was a little antisocial, when you look at all
the people that show those kind of indications it's basically a needle in a haystack to find the ones who are actually going to do something really violent."

Caldwell said it's comforting to say it is a certain type of person that commits violent acts, but that's largely a fallacy.

"In some ways it's easier for us to deal with something like this if we can decide that it's a specific category of person who is the dangerous one. And when you look at all people with serious mental illness, schizophrenia and the like, they really are not more dangerous than people of similar ages in the general population," Caldwell said.

He added incidents like the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary often increase scrutiny for people with mental health issues.

Instead of trying to identify people that might snap, Caldwell said it makes more sense to take general precautions against school shootings or other large-scale violent acts, such as restricting gun sales to people with mental illness.

The national revulsion at the killings of 20 6- and 7-year-olds in Connecticut almost surely will lead to some kind of response, likely a series of small steps, Patchin said.

"Everyone agrees it's impossible to completely stop these things from happening," Patchin said. "But if we can at least reduce the severity or the number of such incidents, then everybody wins."

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_Leader-Telegram reporter John Swedien contributed to this story._