

Oregon lawmakers move to conceal gun permit records

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SALEM, Ore. (AP) -- Sheriffs around Oregon has been sending an unusual letter to holders of concealed weapons permits with this message: If you don't want the public to know you've got a permit, we'll try to help you out.

The letter from the sheriffs says newspapers and others are trying to get lists of people who have concealed handgun permits, sparking a legal challenge that's pending in the Oregon Court of Appeals.

And as the appeals court mulls the issue, Oregon lawmakers are pursuing legislation to take those records completely out of public view by prohibiting their release under the Oregon public records law.

The bill to close those records has broad support, with half of the members of the Legislature, both Democrats and Republicans, signing on as co-sponsors.

It's the latest turn in a dispute over whether the public should have the right to know who is licensed to carry a concealed weapon and whether permit holders have a right to privacy based on personal security considerations.

Washington County Sheriff Rob Gordon was the first sheriff to send letters to concealed handgun license holders last fall, asking 10,000 of them whether they want their names made public if it is requested as an Oregon public record.

Among the thousands of responses he's received, "only two people have expressed a desire to have their application and personal information released to the public," Gordon said.

Other sheriffs around Oregon have gotten similar responses, he said.

"The reaction was very strong," Gordon said. "A lot of people were incredulous. They asked me, 'Why in the world would anybody want that information to be public?'"

Open government advocates say, however, that those records have always been public and that Oregonians should have the right to check to see who is getting concealed weapons permits from local sheriffs.

"Let's say you have a neighbor who is acting irrationally, and maybe even threatening you. Shouldn't you be able to find out if he has a concealed weapons permit?" said Judson Randall, president of Open Oregon and a former senior editor at The Oregonian.

A lower court ruling in the dispute came after the Mail Tribune in Medford requested names of concealed handgun license holders as a public record. The Jackson County sheriff's office refused the request on grounds that the records are not public if they could reveal a person's security measures or weaknesses.

The Jackson County Circuit Court ruled in April 2008 that individuals must specify that they don't want any personal information released. If not, their names are public record, the court said.

Even before the state appeals court has heard arguments in that case, Gordon and other sheriffs have joined with 45 legislators to try to end the debate by promoting House Bill 2727 to prohibit concealed weapons license information from being publicly disclosed.

State Rep. Kim Thatcher, one of the chief sponsors of the bill, said public release of that information "defeats the whole point of having a concealed weapons permit."

"This is a safety issue for a lot of these people," the Keizer Republican said. "Revealing their records unbeknownst to them could attract stalkers, identity thieves and people who could otherwise do them harm."

Besides, she said, the 109,000 Oregonians who have the concealed weapons licenses are law-abiding citizens who have undergone background checks and firearms training to get those permits and there's no good reason to make their records public.

Leading gun owner groups, including the Oregon Firearms Federation and the National Rifle Association, are strongly backing Thatcher's bill.

"People get these licenses to protect their own security and to protect their loved ones. It makes them uneasy to think that it's public knowledge that they have firearms in their homes," said Rod Harder, the Oregon consultant for the National Rifle Association of America Inc.

However, an open records advocate said supporters of the bill have made no compelling case for further chipping away at Oregon's public records law by closing off the gun permit records from public disclosure.

"What is the privacy interest in this case? What abuse has occurred as a result of these records being open?" said Tim Gleason, dean of the University of Oregon's School of Journalism.

Those records should remain open as a practical safety matter, Gleason added.

"What if you're an abuse victim, and you want to know if the person who's abusing you is carrying a concealed weapon?" he said. "That seems like a legitimate question to ask."

The opposition of most sheriffs to publicly releasing those records is not a new development.

A statewide audit of public agencies, conducted in 2005 by The Associated Press and the Society of Professional Journalists, showed widespread resistance to requests to see concealed handgun permit applications, with access granted in only eight of 36 counties.

*Source: kwg.com – News Channel 8 Portland OR*