

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5444

As of January 15, 2024

Title: An act relating to firearm sensitive places.

Brief Description: Concerning firearm sensitive places.

Sponsors: Senators Valdez, Hunt, Kuderer, Nguyen, Pedersen and Saldaña.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Law & Justice: 1/15/24.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Prohibits individuals from entering certain designated places while knowingly possessing a weapon.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON LAW & JUSTICE

Staff: Joe McKittrick (786-7287)

Background: Weapons Prohibited in Designated Places. It is a gross misdemeanor for any person to enter certain designated places while knowingly possessing a weapon. These places are:

- the restricted access areas of a jail or law enforcement facility;
- courtrooms and other areas adjacent to or used in conjunction with court proceedings;
- the restricted access area of a public health facility;
- taverns and other places designated off-limits to persons under age 21 by Liquor and Cannabis Control Board rules; and
- the restricted access areas of commercial service airports.

These prohibitions do not apply to:

- any person engaged in military activities sponsored by the federal or state governments, while engaged in official duties;

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- security personnel while engaged in official duties;
- correctional personnel or community corrections officers except while in taverns and other places off-limits to persons under age 21 or while in a courthouse as a party to an antiharassment protection order action, a domestic violence protection order action, or a domestic relations action where any party has alleged the existence of domestic violence; or
- law enforcement personnel except while in a courthouse when present as a party to an antiharassment protection order action, a domestic violence protection order action, or a domestic relations action where any party has alleged the existence of domestic violence.

An individual with a valid concealed carry permit continue to carry in the restricted access areas of jails or law enforcement facilities if, upon entering the individual promptly proceeds to the administrator of the facility and obtains written permission to possess the firearm while on the premises.

Weapon means any firearm, explosive, or any weapon usually known as a slungshot, sand club, or metal knuckles; or any knife, dagger, dirk, or other similar weapon capable of causing death or bodily injury and is commonly used with the intent to cause death or bodily injury.

The perimeter of the locations listed above must be posted at reasonable intervals to alert the public to the existence of any law restricting the possession of firearms on the premises.

Gross Misdemeanors. Every person convicted of a gross misdemeanor shall be punished by imprisonment in jail for a maximum term of 364 days, a fine not to exceed \$5,000, or both imprisonment and a fine.

Summary of Bill: The following locations are added to the list of designated places at which it is a gross misdemeanor for any person to enter while knowingly possessing a weapon:

- public libraries;
- zoos or aquariums;
- the premises of a city's, town's, county's, or other municipality's neighborhood, community, or regional park facilities at which children and youth are likely to be present and at which appropriate signage has been posted notifying the public that weapons are not permitted;
- transit stations or transit facilities including all passenger facilities, structures, stops, shelters, bus zones, and other properties owned, leased held, or used by a transit authority for the purpose of providing public transportation services;
- state or local public buildings, where "state or public building" means a building, or part of building, owned, leased, held, or used by the governmental entity of a city, town, county, or other municipality: or by the state of Washington, if state or local public employees are regularly present for the purpose of performing their official

duties and not regularly used, and not intended to be used, by state or local employees as a place of residence.

Cities, towns, counties, or other municipalities must designate the park facilities within its boundaries where children are likely to be present and post appropriate signage at reasonable intervals on the perimeter of the facility's premises to notify the public that weapons are prohibited. Facilities at which children are likely to be present include, but are not limited to facilities that have playgrounds, sports fields, swimming or wading pools, teen or community centers, and skate parks.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 9, 2024.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: We have made progress over the years making Washington safer from gun violence, but there is much more work to do. We need to prohibit weapons from those places where children are present. There should be places in our state where families can go without the fear of gun violence. This bill extends common sense safeguards against gun violence to places where people gather. This bill keeps kids safe and helps those kids feel safe. Local governments can prevent speeders and take other measures to create a safety bubble around parks and other places where children are present, but that bubble can be pierced by a bullet because those governments are powerless to prevent someone with a gun from entering that park. We all deserve to live in a world free of gun violence. In 2023, there were more mass shootings than there were days in the year. This bill keeps dangerous weapons away from places where kids play. From 2011 to 2021 firearm fatalities increased by 87 percent across the nation and are now the leading cause of death for children in our country. We have seen far too many acts of preventable gun violence. Many places of public life are vulnerable to the threat of open carry gun violence. No one should have to brave the threat of gun violence to enjoy a park or library. These restrictions reduce the likelihood of an accidental discharge and create a safer atmosphere at places where families congregate. We lose over 100 young people to firearm violence each year in Washington. Libraries are friendly and welcoming places, and it is dangerous and completely unnecessary to allow people to openly carry firearms in public libraries.

CON: The restrictions in this bill bear no relation to this nation's historical tradition of firearm regulations. This bill is not enforceable, and it prohibits those with concealed carry licenses from carrying a firearm. It is a waste of time and money to enact laws that courts have already deemed unconstitutional. This law focuses on the gun and not the criminal and infringes on the rights of law abiding citizens. Public carry is a constitutional right and this bill is clearly unconstitutional. Similar laws to this have been struck down across the nation.

The places where this bill seeks to prohibit weapons are the exact places people are most vulnerable. Minority communities are one of the fastest growing populations of concealed carry licensees, and this bill would prohibit those communities from keeping themselves safe. This bill undermines the ability of parents to keep their families safe. Due to the size of these public spaces, the response time of law enforcement will be delayed, and without the ability of a law-abiding citizen to respond, this bill will make families less safe. Gun-free zones attract gun violence. Responsible firearms carry is becoming essential for people to be safe in public. Do not make laws you cannot enforce. We cannot run a society based around people's worst fears. The rights of the people come first. This state has a tradition of being open to firearm ownership. There is no need for this legislation. While it would make sense to increase sentencing enhancements related to the use of weapons in these places, the restrictions in this bill will only make families less safe while riding the bus or going to the park. If this bill passes, criminals will know that families are defenseless when at parks, zoos, and libraries.

OTHER: It is unclear what this bill is trying to achieve. Murder, assault, and brandishing of a firearm are already illegal. It is not clear this bill has a purpose or will be effective in any way.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Javier Valdez, Prime Sponsor; Julia Berus; Craig Reynolds; Liz Hjelmseth, Moms Demand Action; Neal Black; Paul Dillon; Dr. Jane Lester, Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics; Ashley Brooks; Dr. Gwen Loosmore, Washington State PTA; Paula Barnes.

CON: Rebecca Faust; Eric Pratt, America; Justin Whitaker; Julie Barrett, Conservative Ladies of Washington; Aoibheann Cline, National Rifle Association; Mark Crider, Walla Walla County Sheriff; Wade Gaughran, Eastside Guns; Jon Nelson; Jeremy Ball; Teo Morca.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying:

CON: Justin Michaud; Allen Ernst; Sharon Damoff; Michael McKinley; Jamaal Cowan.