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Are you packing heat? Concealed-carry gains momentum in Illinois

Local law enforcement leaders want legislature to change law

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With 15 killings in six months, East St. Louis is on track to once again earn the label of one of the deadliest cities in the country.

But residents there, like all Illinois citizens, cannot legally walk around with a concealed pistol for protection.

Steve King, who operates the Belleville Indoor Shooting Range, says law-abiding residents of East St. Louis and throughout Illinois should be able to legally carry concealed handguns to defend their lives.

"Much of the crime in our area is in East St. Louis," said King. "This is not meant to be derogatory toward East St. Louis. There are many law-abiding people there who have their backs against the wall who must risk breaking the law to protect themselves. They should be allowed to protect themselves."

And some top metro-east lawmen agree. They urge that a law be adopted in Illinois to make it legal for qualified persons to pack a handgun. Illinois and Wisconsin are the only two states to entirely ban concealed firearms.

St. Clair County Sheriff Mearl Justus, Madison County Sheriff Robert Hertz and Belleville Police Chief Bill Clay all said they would support a concealed-carry law for trained persons who could pass an extensive background check.

The issue of pushing the state legislature to adopt a concealed-carry law for qualified persons is gaining momentum in Southern Illinois and the metro-east, King said. On June 18, more than 250 people jammed the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall in Fairview Heights to hear speakers, including Justus, talk in favor of such a law.

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to issue a ruling regarding a challenge to Chicago's 28-year-old ban on handgun ownership, which prohibits any ownership even in a home. Supporters of concealed carry laws say the case, *McDonald v. Chicago*, will have an effect on concealed-carry legislation, even though it is limited to challenging Chicago's outright ban on handgun ownership.

Illinois resident Valinda Rowe, of [IllinoisCarry.com](#), said, "There is no reason to fear law-abiding people having the means to protect themselves."

Rowe, who spoke at the meeting at the VFW in Fairview Heights, said that while not directly addressing the concealed-carry issue, the *McDonald* Supreme Court case will have a ripple effect.

Rowe, who has a concealed-carry permit from Florida and carries a Kel-Tec 9 mm semi-automatic pistol, said when she reaches the Illinois border she has to pull over, take the magazine out of her pistol, and put both into an enclosed case.

"It's not much good to me that way," she said.

Rowe said that in 1970 the Illinois Constitution was changed to read that the public's right to bear arms shall be subject to police review, which she claims is a violation of the U.S. Constitution's Second Amendment.

"Once we get that out of the way," she said referring to the Chicago handgun ban strongly supported by Mayor Richard Daley, "we can decide if it is constitutional for the states to infringe on the Second Amendment. *McDonald v. Chicago* could be the deciding factor in whether states can do that or not."

Experts on gun laws, including Peter Hamm, spokesman for the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence in Washington, D.C., said even his group is not opposed to concealed-carry laws.

Hamm said his organization favors concealed-carry, but only under a "may-issue" law instead of a "shall-issue" law. This would allow the police discretion to not only run a criminal background check, but also to consider whether frequent requests for police assistance at a particular residence and other risk factors should be reason to deny a permit. Hamm said his organization also favors requiring rigorous training before a permit is issued.

He said that while states like Texas require an applicant to prove proficiency with a handgun, many states require much less, including Virginia, where watching a five-minute video is all the training required.

Hertz, a member of the Illinois Sheriffs Association, which supports concealed-carry laws, said: "The training and background checks are good things. I was one of the sheriffs that supported that and with those stipulations, I still support it."

"Even though it's been like a pingpong ball up in Springfield back and forth, we took that decision last year and that remains our decision today," said Hertz of the state organization.

Hamm said that while many observers believe the Supreme Court will rule that Chicago's handgun ban is unconstitutional, a decision to throw it out would have little relevance to concealed-carry issues in Illinois.

But local proponents of concealed carry said striking down Chicago's gun ban may lift opposition from Chicago-based Democrats and Gov. Pat Quinn, who responded to an Associated Press survey last year by stating he would veto any proposed concealed-carry law.

Rep. Ron Stephens, R-Highland, said: "The Chicago law directly won't affect that, but hopefully it will change the minds of some legislators including the opponents who tend to come from Chicago, where we think concealed carry will have the most benefit."

"It will certainly stir interest," said Stephens, who has sponsored several concealed-carry bills. "But what directly still has to happen is that the law has to change."
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