

Gun control plan unveiled

AUSTIN (AP) — Days after a gunman killed seven people and himself at a Fort Worth church, Texas Attorney General John Cornyn unveiled a new program they said could add prison time in crimes where a weapon is used or possessed.

Under the program, local, state and federal prosecutors will coordinate to make certain criminals face the stiffest prison sentences possible under state or federal law, they said.

In some cases, state law enhances penalties for gun use. In other cases, such as those involving felons and drug dealers, a criminal can receive an additional five-year prison sentence under federal law for gun use or gun possession, Ted Delisi, a spokesperson for the attorney general's office, said. Bush said his office is providing a \$1.6 million grant for the two-year program, with \$1.28 million to pay for eight full-time prosecutors.

The grant also will fund advertising to make Texans aware of the effort and create a toll-free telephone hotline for reporting those suspected of illegally using or possessing guns.

"Gun crime means hard time," Cornyn said. He and Bush said they have been discussing the ef-

fort for several weeks, patterning it after a successful program in Richmond, Va.

Bush said "we certainly hope so" when asked if the new effort might help prevent such tragedies as the Fort Worth shootings.

"What happened in Fort Worth was obviously a very sad situation," Bush said. "Obviously, all of us in Texas are concerned about these isolated acts of a crazy person, a person whose heart is so filled with hate."

"In this particular case, it's hard to convince a crazy man not to act. If it wasn't a gun, it might have been a pipe bomb. ... The idea is to send a clear message, and that maybe somebody hears the clear message, that there will be a consequence, will convince somebody not to carry a gun in the first place," the governor said.

According to authorities, gunman Larry Gene Ashbrook, 47, legally purchased at least one and probably both of his handguns at a flea market shop. Ashbrook did not have a license to carry concealed weapons, however.

Bush, a gun rights supporter, signed the 1995 law that allowed Texans to carry concealed weapons with a permit.

He said yesterday's initiative was not designed to offset any criticism he may get about gun control.



BUSH

Task force investigates schools

Officials looking into possible cheating on state test

AUSTIN (AP) — A task force created by the state comptroller will look into reports of school districts cheating on Texas' statewide student test, inaccurate reporting of dropouts and the amount of money spent on instruction versus administration.

"There are districts doing an excellent job teaching our kids and tracking and reporting data," Comptroller Keeton Rylander said yesterday in announcing the Public Education Integrity Task Force. "They are to be commended. ... But key questions need to be answered. What are the underlying pressures that are creating a climate for cheating?"

Headed by Texas A&M University System Chancellor Emeritus Barry Thompson, the task force will make recommendations next August for consideration by the Texas Legislature in 2001.

If warranted by evidence of wrongdoing, findings will be referred to authorities such as district or U.S. attorneys, Rylander and task force member Michael Levy said. Rylander said she also will work with the TEA on addressing problems.

Problems with school district data already are being looked into by TEA officials and others.

Two school districts got a new, low ranking in the state's accountability system this year because of significant mistakes in reporting of students who left school.

The accountability system ranks schools based on student passing rates on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, dropout rates and attendance.

The TEA is investigating 14 other school districts because of a high number or percentage of students who were not accounted for after leaving public school.

In addition, a Travis County grand jury in April handed up 16 indictments against the Austin Independent School District stemming from alleged manipulation of student testing data.

AISD spokesperson Andy Welch said the district is meeting with the county attorney in the effort to ensure problems do not happen in the future.

TEA spokesperson Joey Lozano said the agency also audits schools on issues, such as students leaving school, and investigates allegations of improper expenditure of public

funds. He said the agency will provide information to the task force if needed.

"The more focus that's on public education in this state, the better it's going to be," Rylander whose office also has authority to audit school districts, said. The Republican officeholder has promised to be the "education watchdog" for Texans.

"I am going to continue to drive more of every education dollar into the classroom," she said.

School districts report that about 52 cents of every dollar spent on education currently go to instruction, Rylander said, calling that number unacceptable.

Levy, founder and publisher of Texas Monthly magazine, said the task force has been assured by the comptroller "that this is not a political agenda, this is about the school kids of Texas."

David Dunn, director of governmental relations for the Texas Association of School Boards, said even though his group isn't included on the task force, "we're here to help them if they want to call on us to help. We would be happy to work with them."

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