

UI holds an open forum on concealed firearms policy

Samantha Malott, Moscow-Pullman Daily News

With concealed firearms now allowed on the University of Idaho campus, security and legal counsel attempted to provide clarity on new policies Tuesday morning to a crowded room of about 100 staff and students.

The open forum was led by Matt Dorschel, the executive director of UI public security and safety, and Kent Nelson, general counsel for the UI. A live feed was also set up with UI branch campuses in Boise, Idaho Falls and Coeur d'Alene, which will be undergoing the same changes from the new state-wide law.

Since Senate Bill 1254 was signed into law back in March by Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, faculty and students have expressed concerns about allowing those carrying enhanced concealed carry or retired law enforcement officer permits to bring firearms onto university campuses around the state.

"It was opposed by all the Idaho universities, but the law did pass," Dorschel said.

The UI created a task force to make recommendations to the university community on how to respond and work with the new policy, Dorschel said, and the university adopted the policy issued by the Idaho State Board of Education to be in full compliance with the new law.

Dorschel addressed a flood of emails received by the campus safety and security office from university employees and students seeking clarification on how to directly deal with an increase of firearms on campus.

Some of the hot topic issues included how to respond if a concealed weapon is seen by a fellow student or staff member, how areas such as federal offices or childcare centers on campus will be effected and what options professors have inside their classrooms.

The law requires all lawfully permitted carriers to conceal their weapons on campus, and any direct violation of that is subject to discipline.

Monique Lillard, a UI law professor, asked how individuals should respond if someone were to inadvertently reveal their firearm, whether under a jacket or when they open a backpack to take out a book. She said she was confused because firearms are allowed on campus but the only person a carrier has to disclose their status to is law enforcement.

Inadvertently showing a firearm is going to have to be handled on a case-by-case basis, Nelson said.

Dorschel added if a firearm is accidentally shown, people should call local law enforcement, who can then check with the individual for proper permits. If it is a reoccurring situation with the individual, further action will need to be taken.

Some questioned whether carrying a gun in a backpack or leaving it inside a vehicle constitutes concealed carry. Nelson said as long as the individual keeps the backpack within their physical proximity, it is considered to be concealed carry. However, it is not considered to be a lawfully concealed firearm if it is left alone in a locked car, Dorschel said.

Dorschel said the university encourages people to use the storage room for firearms located in the campus security office if they want some place to keep their firearms while on campus. The storage office can also be used by people attending events in facilities like the Kibbie Dome or by those who live in residence halls, as firearms will still be prohibited in these areas.

"It's a very secure location behind three locked doors," he said.

Other areas on campus that may be regulated differently than the general campus include federal offices located inside campus buildings and childcare facilities on campus property.

The UI has two childcare facilities located on campus that, according to Dorschel and Nelson, do not meet the qualifications to be considered a school and therefore cannot prohibit firearms inside their facilities.

The university is continuing to investigate the issue further, Nelson said, and will address any safety provisions or statutes that need to be changed if seen fit for these isolated locations within the campus.

Offices such as the U.S. Forest Service office on the Boise campus will follow federal firearms policies, while the remainder of the building and surrounding area will follow campus policy, Dorschel said. This means a single building may be split into sections that do and do not allow firearms.

Single classrooms, Dorschel said, do not have the same freedom to prohibit or allow firearms inside based on what a professor prefers.

Multiple faculty members questioned whether they could add wording to their class syllabus requesting students voluntarily disclose if they are carrying a gun or asking for students to maintain a gun free zone. Nelson said they would need more time to look into volunteer-based requests, but he did like the idea of providing some wording that would be suitable for a professor to include in their syllabus.

Ideally, though, Dorschel said there should be no reason for anyone to disclose their status.

"We aren't going to maintain a list of people who hold a permit," he said.

Dorschel added he is confident in the relationship and response time the university has with the Moscow Police Department in the event of an incident, and he will communicate extensively with departments and students as the fall semester begins.

"This is an evolving and dynamic process," he said. "We will have to make adjustments as necessary."

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