

Opinion

Editorial: Three small steps toward gun sanity

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President Barack Obama addresses the International Chiefs of Police annual conference at McCormick Place Tuesday in Chicago. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

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Three small signs this week point to at least incremental progress in our nation's long and largely frustrated efforts to bring sanity to our gun laws. Let's call it a sliver of hope.

our gun laws. Let's call it a glimmer or nope.

First, President Barack Obama came to town Tuesday and told a gathering of the International Association of Chiefs of Police at McCormick Place that he would keep pushing Congress to enact "common sense measures" to make sure criminals don't get guns. He also defended police at a time when they are being criticized for a breakdown in relations with minority communities, and an aide rightly rebutted critics who say a new hesitancy on the part of police is contributing to a spike in crime.

Second, the village board in suburban Lyons enacted an ordinance Tuesday to make it more difficult for one person to buy a gun secretly for another person, what's known as a straw purchase. Lyons is home to one of four Chicago area gun shops that have been identified as a large source of guns recovered at Chicago crime scenes, so this ordinance could be significant.

Third, the Cook County Board is scheduled to vote Wednesday to create the position of gun policy coordinator — a full-time gig — to head a new gun violence task force. His or her job will be to better mesh local efforts, across all governments and agencies, to reduce gun crimes.

EDITORIAL

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As we say, these are small steps. And nobody should underestimate the power of the gun lobby. But they are steps in the right direction.

For his part, Obama acknowledged gun law reform is just part of what must be done. Law enforcement, he said, needs more resources to do its job properly, criminal justice reforms are necessary to make the system smarter and fairer, and trust must be restored between the police and the communities they serve.

But the president made it clear that smarter gun laws are a big part of what would make America safer, and he vowed to keep pushing a Republican Congress to enact them. "We've got to make it harder for criminals to cause chaos by getting their hands on deadly firearms," he said.

Obama specifically called for a national system of background checks for anyone buying a gun, and he echoed the view of the police chiefs association that civilians should not be allowed to buy military assault weapons.

"Fewer gun safety laws don't mean more freedom, they mean more fallen officers," the president said. "They mean more grieving families, and more Americans terrified that they or their loved ones could be next."

Chicago police are good at getting illegal guns off the streets. They recover seven times as many per capita as police do in New York. But no matter how many guns police confiscate, more pour in to take their place. Stronger gun laws could stanch that flow.

All firearms are legal when they are manufactured, but they make their way into criminals hands' through theft, straw purchases, gun trafficking from lax state laws and off-the-books sales.

When all those illegal guns make their way to the streets, the shooting goes on. A man was shot in Rogers Park on Tuesday morning. Six hours later a man was shot in Woodlawn. Two men were found shot to death Monday in Bolingbrook. Over the weekend six people were killed, and 28 wounded in shootings across the city. More than 2,500 people have been shot in Chicago this year. It's not just Chicago. Homicide totals have been rising in many large American cities.

National background checks would close some loopholes, including gun shows and Internet sales, to ensure those who are legally barred from buying guns can't purchase one. On the state level, we should require all gun dealers to be licensed, which would help make it possible to crack down on gun dealers who repeatedly sell to criminals. And other communities should follow Lyons' example to close the door on straw purchases. Among the measure Lyons approved Tuesday were sharing gun sale information with village police, conducting random gun shop inspections and training gun shop employees to detect straw purchases.

The Cook County Board will take up an ordinance to create a gun violence task force headed by a newly appointed gun violence coordinator, proposed by Commissioner Richard Boykin and backed by State's Attorney Anita Alvarez and Sheriff Thomas J. Dart. Part of the gun violence problem locally, Boykin said, is that the city, suburban police, judges and prosecutors don't share crime data effectively, which makes it hard to plan effective policing strategies.

As of last Friday, 22 percent of the 8,500 inmates at Cook County Jail were facing some type gun charge.

The story of violent crime in Chicago is a story of illegal guns.

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