



## Package of bills targets gangs

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By **HEATHER KAYS**  
**HERALD NEWS**

TRENTON -- A package of bills aimed at curtailing gang and gun violence in cities and towns throughout the state advanced through the Assembly on Monday.

Taken together, the 17-bill package would toughen gun laws, offer more protection to crime witnesses and educate children about the perils of street gangs before the gangs lure them in.

Assembly Majority Leader Bonnie Watson Coleman, who spearheaded the bills through the lower house, called the measures "triage" for a gang violence epidemic that involves an estimated 17,000 members and was responsible for 1,900 criminal justice cases last year.

"Together, this package seeks to protect our communities, protect our children, protect our witnesses and give the law enforcement community additional tools to crack down on some of this," Watson Coleman said.

Assemblyman Alfred E. Steele, D-Paterson, co-sponsored one of the bills increasing penalties for crimes involving the illegal possession of an assault weapon; the selling, giving or transferring of a gun to a minor; and the possession, transfer or use of a "community gun."

A community gun is a firearm traded among gang members to commit crimes. Currently, the penalty is up to five years in prison and \$15,000 in fines. If the legislation is passed in the state Senate and signed into law, the penalty would increase to up to 10 years in jail and \$150,000 in fines.

"This legislation shows that there will be a zero tolerance policy for gang activity," said Steele.

Among other things, the measures would:

- n Regulate the sale of ammunition.
- n Require gun violence prevention seminars for elementary school students.
- n Add gang-crime information to Uniform Crime Report.
- n Bar disclosure of addresses or other personal data of grand jury witnesses.

The bills now head to the Senate Law, Public Safety and Veterans Affairs Committee for consideration. The committee chairman, Sen. John A. Girgenti, D-Hawthorne, has long had an interest in curbing the pervasive influence of gangs in communities and prisons.

The measures had bipartisan support in the Assembly, although the support was not unanimous.

For example, the bill regulating the sale of ammunition drew concern from Republican Assemblywoman Alison Littell McHose, R-Sussex, who said the measure amounted to an attack on legal owners.

"It's unfortunate we are spending time passing bills like this when the criminals don't regard any of these laws," she said.

The Attorney General's Office and the New Jersey League of Municipalities both expressed support for the legislation.

Steele, however, said that funding for the package was short.

"The next phase of legislation would begin to put more money into the preventative measures," Steele said, acknowledging that the \$50,000 that has been allotted for the creation of a Youth Employment and After School Incentive Pilot Program under one bill was simply not enough.

The Rev. Stafford Miller, the pastor of St. Philip's United Methodist Church in Paterson and one of the organizers of the city's antigun violence campaign, said such funding was not serious.

"If we are looking at the depth and severity of the problem, I think \$50,000 is an insult," Miller said. "I hope that we can see a mere \$50,000 is only a drop in the bucket. Multiply that number by 10 and then maybe that's a start."

However, Miller, who spends most of his time helping the youth in Paterson stay out of gangs and in school, said he saw value in the anti-gang package.

"We need all the help we can get," he said. "We're taking young people from a way of life. We need to offer an alternative. This requires time, money and commitment. There needs to be more community-based and more grass-roots efforts. We're not going to fix these problems overnight."

The gang unit at the Passaic County Prosecutor's Office did not return phone calls Monday.

Angela Delli Santi of the Associated Press contributed to this report.

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