Concealed Campus Carry Laws May Mean Big Costs for Public Universities

By Matthew Arant

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Just days before the end of the 84th legislative session, Texas lawmakers approved a measure along party lines requiring public universities to allow certain individuals 21 years and older to carry concealed handguns on campus. Although the bill had not been signed into law as of June 9, Gov. Greg Abbot repeatedly has expressed his approval of the measure. One noticeable absence from the bill, however, is the lack of provisions detailing how the likely costs of upgrading campus security facilities will be funded, an issue that has plagued other states allowing concealed campus carry.

Upon enactment of the law, Texas will become the eighth state to allow the carrying of concealed weapons on public colleges and universities, joining Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, Oregon, Utah and Vermont. Texas is a significant addition to this group given the state’s estimated 1.3 million students enrolled in public colleges and universities.

Elsewhere across the nation, 19 states have passed laws explicitly banning guns on campus, while another 23 states leave the decision to individual institutions.

A common component of concealed carry laws for universities and colleges is the establishment of “gun-free zones” on campuses, such as residential halls, sporting venues and classrooms. The implementation of designated gun-free zones on campuses and new campus security measures addressing proper gun storage facilities have resulted in significant costs for states where students are legally allowed to carry a concealed weapon.

Before the passage of Texas’ concealed carry bill—Senate Bill 11—Idaho was the most recent state to enact concealed campus carry legislation, which became effective July 1, 2014. Five of Idaho’s public colleges and universities are expecting costs of upwards of $3.7 million total for security upgrades as a result of the law, which covers costs ranging from the hiring of security and safety officials to the purchasing of signs and metal detectors, according to the Idaho Statesman.

Despite assurances of minimal financial impacts from the bill’s sponsors, the schools are expected to shoulder the added costs; no additional funding was allocated by either the governor or the legislature in Idaho.

“For us, the biggest challenge was accelerating the process of upgrading campus security to ensure adequate compliance with the law before its effective date,” said Greg Hahn, associate vice president of communications and marketing at Boise State University. Installing metal detectors at university stadiums and arenas cost the university $500,000, while $1 million annually will be devoted to the
university’s partnership with the Boise Police Department for services such as training and equipment, as well as having a member of the city’s police department stationed on campus at all times.

Like Idaho, Kansas and Texas undoubtedly will have to update campus buildings in accordance with their state’s concealed campus carry legislation in the coming months. Although the law in Kansas went into effect in 2013, an exemption was included that allowed colleges and universities to opt out of implementation for a period of up to four years. The opt-out period ends July 2017, and some university officials have expressed concern about the anticipated costs of upgrading campus facilities.

Similar to the gun-free zone provision in the Texas bill, Kansas’ concealed campus carry law provides that unless buildings have “adequate security measures,” the carrying of concealed weapons on Kansas public colleges and universities is allowed. Determining which university buildings fulfill the statutory requirement of safety is among the tasks that must be completed before the opt-out period expires.

Although it is too early to tell how much money will be needed to ensure proper safety measures on campuses in Kansas and Texas, the failure to include funding provisions in these bills has led to a general sense of fiscal uncertainty among university administrators, a sentiment echoed by Jenny LaCoste-Caputo, executive director of public affairs at The University of Texas System’s Board of Regents.

“We’re still trying to fully wrap our heads around the issue of identifying the potential total costs due to not only the recent passage of the legislation but also the large number of students enrolled in the University of Texas System,” said Lacoste-Caputo.

Despite this growing uncertainty, university officials in Texas have begun taking steps to address this concern. “(Texas State University System) Chancellor Brian McCall has created a task force to address the potential issues surrounding campus carry legislation and will meet in the coming weeks,” said Julia May, associate director of communications at Sam Houston State University.

The costs accrued at Idaho colleges serve as a cautionary tale to education administrators in Texas. According to the Houston Chronicle, independent financial analyses conducted by The University of Texas and University of Houston systems estimate that the potential costs for complying with campus carry legislation could total nearly $40 million. That number has become a matter of debate, however, because the majority of those estimated costs would come from university-operated hospitals, such as MD Anderson Cancer Center, and these buildings are exempt from the legislation. While the actual costs to the state’s universities for implementation of the bill remain unclear, university officials expect the fiscal impact to be significant.