

NRA not joking about schools with armed guards

By Dan Freedman, Hearst Newspapers

WASHINGTON – The head of the NRA’s controversial bid to place armed guards in schools nationwide said the effort is serious and not simply window dressing in the wake of the Newtown school shootings.

Responding to criticism that the National Rifle Association was “tone deaf” in proposing deployment of qualified volunteers in schools, former Rep. Asa Hutchinson, R-Ark., said he is solely interested in preventing repetitions of Newtown, in which a rifle-wielding gunman killed 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

“I don’t have to participate in the political debate,” said Hutchinson, a former administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration and high-ranking Department of Homeland Security official, in an interview Friday. “My focus is on the safety side of the issue. The political discussion can happen at a different level.”

Asked why even modest gun-control proposals were not part of the NRA’s proposal, Hutchinson said: “You can pass all the laws you want, but you won’t make schools safer. What will make a difference is better security and people there to protect children.”

After the Newtown shootings Dec. 14, the 4-million-member NRA went dark for a week, declining to comment while rage over weakened firearms laws and outcries for greater gun control were cresting. When the NRA finally convened a news conference Dec. 21, it was to announce that Hutchinson would head the organization’s new National School Shield Program, the centerpiece of which was recruitment of a corps of trained

former police officers and military personnel to serve as an armed presence in schools.

The announcement drew wide ridicule from the White House and Democrats on Capitol Hill, with President Obama telling NBC, "I am skeptical that the only answer is putting more guns in schools."

In the interview, Hutchinson insisted armed volunteers in schools is one of a laundry list of ideas that he and his team will consider as it prepares a set of recommendations on best security practices for schools to consider.

"What's important to me is that we don't start into this study with a closed mind," Hutchinson said.

Another option, Hutchinson said, is arming school personnel – teachers and administrators – who are interested in firearms training.

The idea of armed volunteers and teachers has evoked much caustic criticism from gun control proponents.

"Given the number of times the most highly trained law enforcement officers hit the wrong target, it's scary to think of what a volunteer or teacher might do in a situation they've never experienced before," said Jonathan Lowy, director of the legal action project at the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

Yet another option, Hutchinson said, is the expansion of school resource officers, on-duty armed police who perform a wide range of tasks in schools that include interacting with students, teachers and administrators and helping implement security measures.

Hutchinson estimated the cost of putting a resource officer in every school at \$2 billion to \$3 billion a year, which he acknowledged would be hard to fund in lean budgetary times.

In the 2009-10 school year, 23,200 armed security personnel were in schools nationwide, 28 percent of all schools, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Mo Canady, executive director of the National Association of School Resource Officers, based in Hoover, Ala., estimated there were about 10,000 resource officers working in schools.

Interviewed on Thursday, Canady said he had not received a call from the NRA about his organization's 23 years of experience in helping train police officers to work in schools.

"We'd feel more comfortable if we had a clearer picture of (the NRA's) intentions," said Canady, himself a retired police officer. "Working in school is a unique assignment for police officers. You have to have the proper temperament and you have to be properly trained. It's not the right job for every police officer."

After an inquiry to the NRA by Hearst Newspapers, Hutchinson called Canady on Friday.

"I look forward to sharing with anyone – not just the NRA – who wants to know what we've done the last 23 years," Canady said after the call. "We're not perfect, but I feel like we've done things that were very successful." Legal experts say there's a wide gap between having on-duty police officers at schools and recruiting a corps of volunteers whose training and ability levels might vary.

"A lot of good comes of having school resource officers in schools," said Francisco Negrón, general counsel for the National School Boards Association. "Our comfort decreases as training for individuals with weapons decreases."

With school districts facing increased liability exposure, the NRA should consult "local school districts, school board members, PTAs and superintendents," Negrón said. "One size

fits all rarely is a good idea.” An officer or volunteer who fired a weapon in school might prompt a lawsuit, for instance, if they accidentally hit an innocent person.

“The police officer would be able to assert entitlement to qualified immunity from civil rights claims,” said Thomas Brandt, a Dallas lawyer who represents local governments and school boards in Texas.

But a volunteer, much like a “bouncer in a bar,” might not have that protection in the eyes of the law, he said. The NRA’s proposal “may work itself out to be a good idea ultimately, but there’s a lot of distance between here and there.”

Hutchinson said liability would be part of his team’s research. “The liability concern is always there,” he said. “The key is you have to make available to school districts the best national strategies for safety and training.”

Hutchinson declined to attach a pricetag to the NRA effort. “I’ve been told by the NRA, ‘you give us a budget and we’ll back you up.’ “