



Hearing on H.R. 822 National Right-to-Carry Reciprocity Act of 2011

Before the House Judiciary Committee

Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security

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Testimony from Charles H. Ramsey

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Good Morning and thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify today.

This is an important opportunity to discuss a critical issue affecting law enforcement organizations across our nation and our ability to serve the public.

Having had forty-two years in policing and law enforcement, I have witnessed many important changes in public safety across police departments in three cities: first in Chicago for 30 years, then as Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department here in Washington, DC, for nine years, and now as Police Commissioner in Philadelphia, the nation's fourth largest police department for the past three and half years.

I also have the privilege of serving as both the President of the Major Cities Chiefs Association (MCCA), which represents the leadership of 63 of the largest municipalities in the United States, and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), a national organization dedicated to improving policing and advancing professionalism through research and involvement in public policy debate.

Local police agencies across the nation have made significant gains in preventing and reducing crime in the past thirty years. During this time, we have seen improvements in our technology infrastructure, in our local, state and federal law enforcement partnerships, and in our ability to deliver a high level of police service.

Our strategies have become more evidence-based, more targeted and more effective; we have and we will continue to make progress with fewer resources in an economy that has also dramatically shifted the landscape of policing, as it has every other part of society.

Let us continue to make progress, and do so in a way that is reasonable, based on sound policy, and with the highest commitment to both officer and community safety.

I am here today to urge Congress to oppose H.R.822, the “National Right-to-Carry Reciprocity Act.” This bill would eliminate the right that states now have to set their own public safety laws, in consultation with law enforcement professionals. This legislation is not aligned with our vision for the future of policing. It is counter to what the field of law enforcement needs to create safer neighborhoods, towns and cities.

The federal government under this bill would compel every state to honor every other state’s permit to carry concealed, loaded guns—no matter how different their standards and criteria for securing a permit. H.R. 822 undermines the traditional authority of state and local governments to protect their citizens with reasonable, constitutional and community-specific laws for carrying hidden, loaded guns.

Every state legislature has intensely debated what minimum standards should apply within their borders and has put those standards in place. For example, thirty-eight states will not grant permits to people convicted of certain violent misdemeanors, such as assault, stalking or sex offenses. Thirty-six states do not issue permits to people under the age of twenty-one. Twenty-nine states deny permits to alcohol abusers, including—in many states—people convicted of driving under the influence. And thirty-five states require some type of gun safety training or live-fire practice.

We have a uniquely diverse nation. What works where I currently serve as Commissioner in Philadelphia, and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, does not work for our neighbor across the river in New Jersey. Our laws for obtaining a permit are vastly different, based on well-debated decisions made at the state level. This bill would allow people to carry concealed and loaded guns in every state, without consideration for the minimum standards created by their governments.

It is true that some states have decided to enter into voluntary reciprocity agreements and others have not. Today, states have the choice to cancel an agreement when the state no longer meets their minimum standards. For example, New Mexico and Nevada both terminated reciprocity agreements with Utah in part because Utah does not include live-fire instruction as part of its training requirement.

If a state has decided that a person should demonstrate proficiency with a gun before carrying it loaded in public, Washington should not second-guess that decision.

As Police Commissioner in Philadelphia, I don't need hypothetical examples to show you why this bill is a dangerous idea, one that already gets played out in the daily challenges that our Philadelphia Police Officers and our citizens face.

In 2005, a man named Marqus Hill had his concealed carry permit revoked by Philadelphia Police after he had been charged with attempted murder. During the revocation hearing, he attacked an officer. But later, he got a new permit from Florida despite his record. Hill then used his Florida permit to carry a loaded gun in Philadelphia. He eventually shot a teenager thirteen times in the chest, killing him in the street.

Cases such as Marqus Hill, unfortunately, are becoming more ordinary, as more people whose desire is to cause harm, use the current system to circumvent Pennsylvania's process.

H.R.822 would nationalize the ill-conceived policy that put a gun in Marqus Hill's hands. Pennsylvania's current reciprocity agreements with 25 other states, including Florida, have demonstrated the difficulty and the impact that a national policy such as H.R. 822 would impose.

Consider the following situation, which could happen if this bill were to become law. A police officer in Brookfield, Wisconsin has just pulled over a speeding driver who is a resident of Texas. Through conversation with the driver, the officer learns that he has a gun, and the driver presents a concealed carry permit from Utah, which grants non-resident permits.

How is the Brookfield officer supposed to verify that the Utah permit is real and up-to-date? And to what degree does the out-of-state and non-resident permit give the officer confidence that the individual is responsible, well-trained and thoroughly vetted?

This is all happening in the context of a traffic stop where tensions may already be running high. The officer is faced with an individual who has a loaded gun, and the officer is unable to verify whether the person is carrying that gun legally. With this law in effect, police would see an out-of-state permit, and simply be required to honor it. The consequences for our front-line police officers could be severe and dire.

Inspecting a concealed carry permit is often the only tool an officer has to determine whether an individual is legally carrying a concealed firearm.

Congress should not consider a policy at the federal level that has no implementation system. We as police leaders cannot leave our officers, whose safety is our first priority, without a mechanism to determine if the permit they hold in their hands is real and valid.

The right-to-carry a concealed and loaded gun is already a highly contested debate. I ask Congress to leave this debate where it should remain, as a decision for each state. Today I represent countless uniformed officers across the nation, who oppose this bill, including the police chiefs who are members of the Major Cities Police Chiefs Association, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and the Police Executive Research Forum, amongst others.

As we face the challenge of keeping our citizens and our officers safe, I ask Washington to partner with local law enforcement agencies, and develop reasonable approaches that protect citizens, protect our officers, and support states' rights to provide public safety for their communities.

I am happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you to all members of the Committee for providing me with the opportunity to testify before you today.