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HEADLINE: Citizens' Groups Pushing Gun Initiatives in the West

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BODY:

Frustrated by their legislatures' unwillingness to pass new gun-control measures, citizen groups in three Western states are collecting signatures to put the issues before voters this fall as **ballot initiatives**.

Leaders of the groups -- in Colorado, Utah and Oregon -- say popular support for their efforts is growing, a trend that reflects a significant change in attitudes about gun rights in areas of the country where guns have always been part of the culture.

In Colorado and Oregon, the **ballot initiatives** would close the so-called gun show loophole by requiring criminal background checks for people who buy guns from private dealers at weekend gun shows, where a quarter of all vendors are not licensed, according to a 1999 report by the Treasury and Justice Departments and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

The Utah effort is aimed at denying people who have permits to carry concealed weapons from taking their guns into churches or public schools.

All three states have Republican-led legislatures that have acted with apparent disregard to the shift in public sentiment. Yet each has a governor who backs the ballot measures, including two who are Republican, Bill Owens of Colorado and Michael O. Leavitt of Utah. Gov. John Kitzhaber of Oregon is a Democrat.

"To some degree, the Columbine tragedy has impacted people's views," said Arnold Grossman, a Denver political media consultant and founder of the Colorado group collecting signatures, explaining why polls in all three states have shown strong popular support for the measures. "As the population shifts in the West, with more people coming in from California and the East, attitudes shift. We're moving away from the frontier mentality."

The fatal shootings of 12 students and a teacher last year at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., were carried out with guns bought through nonlicensed sales at the Tanner Gun Show in Denver. The shootings prompted lawmakers in several states, and in Congress, to introduce measures that would make private gun dealers conduct the same kind of background checks that licensed dealers require of their customers.

None of the bills have passed, leaving Florida as the only state where private dealers are required to conduct background checks, the result of a 1998 measure that gave counties there the discretion to enforce the law. A survey by Handgun Control Inc., a private group that supports tighter gun laws, said only 10 of Florida's 67 counties are doing so.

After similar bills failed this year in Colorado and Oregon, citizen groups emerged to press ahead with

ballot initiatives, and organizers in both states say groups in other states are watching their efforts closely to plan their own strategies.

"What you're seeing is an increasing frustration across the country with the way Congress and state legislatures have handed a basic public safety issue," said Senator Frank R. Lautenberg of New Jersey, a Democrat whose amendment to a 1999 bill that failed in the House would have closed the gun show loophole. He added that as long as lawmakers are influenced by gun lobbyists, "Americans will try anything, including **ballot initiatives**, to protect themselves from gun violence."

The National Rifle Association and other gun rights groups are fighting each of the **ballot initiatives**.

In Oregon and Colorado, they oppose the measures for the same reason they lobbied against Mr. Lautenberg's amendment: that a background check that could take three days would effectively put private dealers out of business because most gun shows last only a weekend.

The Oregon initiative, similar to an unsuccessful bill sponsored by State Senator Ginny Burdick, Democrat of Portland, has the burden of competing against another initiative that Ms. Burdick said was intended to confuse voters.

A group called Oregon Gun Owners, which objects to elements of the Burdick measure, including the penalties, is collecting signatures for an initiative that would have lighter sanctions.

"They have clouded this terribly," Ms. Burdick said.

John Hellen, administrator of the gun owners group, disagreed. But he conceded that having two choices before voters "might be beneficial to us" in that his initiative also reflects concerns about lax prosecutions of gun crimes by recommending minimum sentences.

The effort in Colorado, where the Columbine shootings have added layers of emotion to every gun debate, also follows the failure of a loophole bill. It was part of a package of measures supported by Governor Owens, who has vowed to campaign for the **ballot initiative** and predicted that it would pass by a wide margin.

In Utah, an effort to ban guns from schools and churches was a centerpiece of Governor Leavitt's legislative agenda this year. After it failed, a coalition of groups, led by the Utah Parent-Teachers Association, organized to collect signatures to place an initiative on the ballot in November.

Colleen Taylor, president of the association, conceded that in a state as conservative as Utah, collecting signatures from 10 percent of the registered voters in 20 of Utah's 29 counties, the minimum needed to get the initiative on the ballot, could be difficult.

Governor Leavitt, who is not expected to encounter any problems winning election to a third term this year, is taking no chances, nonetheless, letting others take the lead in campaigning for the initiative.

"It's better for the issue," he said. "This ought to be about guns in our schools, not Governor Leavitt's or the Legislature's position."

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GRAPHIC: Photo: J. D. Tanner at the Denver pavilion where he set up a gun show in 1999.
(Associated Press)

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Josh Gottheimer

PRESIDENT WILLIAM J. CLINTON

REMARKS FOR MARYLAND BILL SIGNING

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

April 11, 2000

Ack: Gov. Glendening; Lt. Gov. Kennedy-Townsend [her deep personal commitment to common sense gun reform have made a difference in Maryland]; Secretary of State John Willis; House Speaker Casper Taylor; Senate President Mike Miller; members of Congress; members of the state legislature; students from Young Kids Against Violence and Students Together Against Guns.

It is fitting that we are gathered here today, in our nation's oldest functioning state house, where progress has been the standard since our forebears walked these halls more than 200 years ago.

This State House was the site of the ratification of the Treaty of Paris, which officially put an end to the Revolutionary War, and marked the birth of our new nation. We are here today to announce a victory in our effort to end another war -- our ongoing struggle to reduce the staggering toll of gun violence in America. The Maryland legislature made history again last week when you became the first state in the nation to require built-in safety locks for all new handguns – and enacted other common sense gun safety measures.

The people of Maryland demanded this landmark gun safety legislation. And their government answered the call. That is why I am here today.

And why I applaud the work of Governor Glendening, the members of the state legislature, and all of you. You have set an example for our nation by your efforts to keep guns off our streets and our children safe from violence.

Maryland is not a newcomer to this movement. This State has already banned assault weapons and handguns known as Saturday Night Specials. You have already limited handgun sales to one per month. With this new law, you join a growing number of states across the country that are taking decisive action to make guns safer and to save lives.

Last year, California passed important legislation limiting handgun sales to one per month, and banning junk guns and new generations of assault weapons. Just last week, Massachusetts began enforcing tough consumer product safety rules for guns, banning junk guns and requiring trigger locks and other devices to prevent children from firing guns. And tomorrow, I am traveling to Colorado to support a citizen ballot initiative to close the gun show loophole and require background checks on all gun sales.

I am encouraged by the steps these states are taking. They underscore the fact that outside the beltway, common sense gun reform is not a partisan issue.

But every child in America deserves that same level of protection. And only Congress can pass legislation that protects every child in every corner of our country.

That's why I've asked Congress to enact common sense gun safety legislation before the one-year anniversary of the Columbine tragedy on April 20th. Legislation that requires child safety locks, bans the importation of large ammunition clips, and closes the loophole that allows criminals to buy firearms at gun shows. But for nine months now, Congress has been stalling. Today, Congress, once again, will vote on a measure simply calling for the House and Senate to meet and work out their differences on this legislation.

Every day Congress waits to send me that bill, we lose 12 children – and nearly 90 people overall -- to gun violence in America. That is why we can not – and we must not -- wait for every state to pass responsible gun legislation. Congress must follow the lead of states like Maryland ... listen to the people ... stand up to the gun lobby ... and pass national gun safety legislation without further delay.

Of course, no law can prevent every death. But sensible gun laws do make a difference. The Brady Law is a perfect example of that. When we passed the Brady Bill, people argued that it wouldn't work because criminals don't buy guns at gun stores.

It turned out that many of them did. All told, since the Brady Bill took effect, we have stopped more than a half a million guns from falling into the hands of fugitives, felons, or stalkers – and gun crime is down more than 35 percent.

At the same time, we have stepped up our enforcement of gun crimes. Since 1992, we have increased federal gun prosecutions by 16 percent. And my new budget calls for the largest firearms enforcement initiative in history, including 500 new ATF agents and inspectors and more than 1,000 new federal, state, and local gun prosecutors.

And last month, we announced a landmark agreement with Smith and Wesson to reform the way guns are manufactured, marketed and sold. That agreement helped make this day possible by demonstrating that responsible gun manufacturers could join with us to make progress.

The Smith and Wesson agreement did not come easily. Nor did the Brady Law. Nor did the bill we're here to sign today. But as Frederick Douglass, one of the great citizens of Maryland, once said, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." We succeeded in each case because courageous citizens and responsible leaders like you dared to put the interests of the American people above the special interests.

The nation's capitol may no longer be located here in Annapolis, but you have shown national leadership today.

It is time to press ahead until common sense gun legislation is the law of the land. Thank you for inviting me to this signing. But for the sake of America's children, we must not stop at the State House. We have to take this progress all the way to the people's house, the White House. It's time to give all Americans the same protections that the citizens of Maryland received today.

Congratulations again, thank you, and God bless you.

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