

Legislation gets criticism for shielding gun makers

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By Gary Wisby

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A North Shore congresswoman and anti-gun groups urged the U.S. Senate Tuesday to defeat a bill they say gives special protection to the gun industry.

The bill makes gun manufacturers and dealers immune to lawsuits seeking damages resulting from the misuse of their products by others. The White House and other supporters argue that makers and sellers of a legal, non-defective product shouldn't be unfairly punished, but Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) said Tuesday the measure would unfairly void pending cases, including a suit against a dealer who sold two guns to Benjamin Smith.

Smith killed former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong and wounded nine others before taking his own life in 1999.

Schakowsky pointed to a poll by Teenage Research Unlimited that found 41 percent of teenagers said they could get a handgun if they wanted to.

Apologizing for last week's 285-140 House vote in favor of the legislation, Schakowsky said, "This bill has got to be defeated and more sane gun safety legislation enacted."

The handgun is not covered by consumer product safety laws, even though "it is the only product designed to inflict serious physical injury or death," she said.

Steve Young, an Evanston man whose son Andrew was murdered in 1996, said a "small but dirty group of dealers [is behind] illegal sales" of handguns. "If this bill gets through, it will open the floodgates."

Young's lawsuit against a gun manufacturer is being combined with a \$433 million City of Chicago suit against the gun industry. The city suit accuses manufacturers, distributors and dealers of flooding neighborhoods with handguns that are purchased in suburbs and wind up in the city, where they are illegal.

Mike Forti, deputy corporation counsel, said he hopes the Illinois Supreme Court will hear the lawsuit this fall.

"This [bill] strips gun violence victims of their right to a day in court and gives special immunity to the gun industry, even when it acts negligently," said Thom Mannard, president of Illinois Justice for Gun Victims.

Mannard and representatives of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence said these kinds of claims will be barred if the legislation passes:

*A gun manufacturer designs an assault weapon specifically to appeal to criminals and markets it directly to them.

*A dealer ignores guns missing from his inventory which later are used in crimes.

*A gun maker fails to design weapons with a built-in lock or with a chamber-loaded indicator, an

easily incorporated device that would prevent as many as 20 percent of unintentional shootings.

Gun manufacturers say they should not be held responsible for the criminal acts of people who obtain their products. They say it is outrageous to assert that the policies of the gun makers contribute to murder.