

Gun-permit changes arrive

Implementing checks makes process, and county, safer, says Sheriff Savokinas, adding residents might wait extra days for permits.

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WILKES-BARRE – Luzerne County residents might have to wait a few days longer to obtain a gun permit, Sheriff Michael Savokinas said, but it's all part of making the process – and the county – safer.

The wait can take up to the state-mandated guideline of 45 days, Savokinas said, which will include a thorough background check through local and state police, and a check of references.

Savokinas said the changes have been in the works since he took office in January and have finally come together.

“(The changes came) because of an accumulation of things going on in the community,” Savokinas said. “I’ve revoked 150 permits that were issued for various reasons because they failed a background check ... that’s a high number. It’s taken me this long to get to (this point).”

Savokinas said his firearms division will be in charge of calling references listed on the gun permit to ensure the applicants live where they say they do and to vouch for character, as well as conducting a background check.

“The sheriff’s department is mandated by law to follow certain guidelines. The law gives me 45 days; however, I don’t think it will take the full 45 days,” Savokinas said.

He hopes two to three weeks will be enough time to conduct background searches and reference checks before issuing gun permits in the county.

Savokinas said he will allow applicants to come to the sheriff’s department, fill out an application, get their picture taken for the license, sign it and pay for it. The department will then do the background check.

The sheriff said he would then e-mail or call applicants to let them know their check came back OK, and allow them to pick up their permit. Savokinas said that for residents who live in places such as Hazleton, he would hope in the near future that the department would be able to mail the permits, rather than having residents drive to Wilkes-Barre when gas prices are skyrocketing.

He said the department sees up to 20 to 30 gun-permit applications a day, and that by having employees make calls to references and police, no extra taxpayer money will be used.

“We’re going to have enough time to complete the task,” Savokinas said. “Once we get the system in place, it’s going to roll smoothly.”

Savokinas said the icing on the cake, so to speak, for the gun-permit changes was the case of triple-homicide suspect Randall Rushing, 25, of Scranton.

According to county records, Rushing obtained a gun permit in Luzerne County several months before, police say, Rushing killed three people in a Scranton home in July.

Rushing is accused of stabbing the victims, but was also carrying a handgun and used it to threaten at least one victim in the home, police said.

Savokinas said the application gives Rushing's address as a homeless shelter in Wilkes-Barre, and the names and addresses of two required references are illegible.

"Now, if it's illegible, it's going to be rejected," Savokinas said. "We're going to check home addresses, and we're going to ask questions. Nothing in life is 100 percent, but we want to do our best to alleviate any problems."

There's no way you can predict what someone will do once they obtain the gun permit, Savokinas said.

"Rushing is just another example," he said. "Stuff could happen. We won't negate the fact people had to die, but having a permit or not wouldn't change that."

Since last Monday, when the new changes took effect, Savokinas said several residents applying for permits had no complaints about the application process taking longer.

"Everyone seemed happy with it," Savokinas said. "My main thing is it's for the best of the county."