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AG Targets Workplace Violence – Hood Looks to Train Law Enforcement to Intervene in On-the-Job Disputes

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Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood announced Monday plans for an initiative to curb workplace violence, two days before the governor's ceremonial signing of a bill that would allow employees to store firearms in their cars at work.

Hood released a manual detailing warning signs, as well as steps for businesses and employees to take before and after a workplace conflict turns violent.

“What I want us to get to is a 100 percent reporting of any statement made by an employee or whomever in the workplace to the effect of ‘I want to kill somebody,’ ” Hood said. “If we make it taboo then we won't have these statements, and many times we won't have these types of people in our workplaces.”

Hood said his office also will be training law enforcement officers in all 82 counties over three years to intervene in workplace disputes. A similar initiative will be aimed at preventing violence in schools, Hood said.

Claiborne County Administrator James Miller applauds Hood's efforts to involve the law enforcement community in preventing workplace violence.

Miller was one of three targets in a rampage by a former county employee in March. While Miller escaped with only broken windows at his Mansion Street home, Carl Brandon, the county's former road manager, is charged with killing county attorney Allen Burrell and wounding another employee.

Brandon was fired from his county job in 1997 and authorities suspect his failed legal battle to regain the post was the impetus for the rampage.

Miller said if the law enforcement community had taken Brandon's threats more seriously, the violence would have had a better chance of being prevented. “Someone can't have carte blanche to make threats on someone's lives without repercussions,” Miller said.

Hood was joined by Blake Wilson, president of the Mississippi Economic Council, and Jay Moon, president of the Mississippi Manufacturer's Association. Wilson said he would put the booklet up on

the organization's Web site, and put information in its newsletter to get the word out to more than 7,000 employers in the state.

"When work-force violence occurs, it just throws any company into upheaval," Wilson said. "Any amount of violence needs to be stopped."

But critics of a new law passed during the 2006 legislative session say House Bill 1141 may hamper those efforts by giving disgruntled employees easier access to guns.

The law allows employees to keep a firearm in their vehicle at work, so long as the parking area is not gated or watched by a security guard. Gov. Haley Barbour has already signed the bill into law, but will hold a ceremony to announce it Wednesday.

The law goes into effect July 1.

Its supporters say it will allow law-abiding citizens the opportunity to defend themselves in situations of workplace violence.

Sen. Charlie Ross, the author of the provision, says the new law will not mean an increase in workplace violence. "If somebody is going to use a gun to hurt somebody at work, they're going to do that regardless of what the company rule is on firearms," Ross said.

Ross says state law already allows Mississippians to carry guns in their cars. If employees and customers park in the same lot, Ross says, the new law allows the employee to be treated like a member of the general public.

But state Rep. Billy Broomfield, D-Moss Point, called the bill a "colossal mistake."

Broomfield works at the Northrop Grumman shipyard where an employee was killed and another injured in a February 2005 workplace shooting. "If we're going to try to curb workplace violence, the way to do it is not allow a person to keep something with the ability to take a life so close by," Broomfield said.

Hood's manual cites "bringing a weapon to the workplace" as one of the indicators in its "profile of a potentially violent employee."

Hood says under the new law an employer should be able to make its own policy on whether employees can bring guns to work.

He made the distinction between an employee bringing a rifle to work so he could go hunting after his shift and one that may have been making threatening remarks.

"Ease of access would impact that, but you've got to tailor it to each individual situation," Hood said. "An individual director is the one who's got to evaluate those situations."