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NC private school teachers can carry guns under new law

Rylee Ober

Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - North Carolina law now allows private schools to give teachers, employees and volunteers permission to carry concealed handguns and stun guns on school grounds. That's thanks to House Bill 193, which took effect Dec. 1 after Republican law-

makers overrode Democratic Gov. Josh Stein's veto on July 29. The now-enacted bill includes other changes to firearm and criminal laws, including increasing penalties for assaulting or threatening executive, legislative, court or local elected officers. State law generally forbids carrying firearms on school property, and anyone who is not a law enforcement officer can be found guilty of a Class I felony or mis-

demeanor if they do so. However, this new law allows private schools to authorize teachers, other employees and volunteers to carry concealed handguns or stun guns if they have a concealed handgun permit and complete eight hours of training courses every year. This law does not apply to public schools. See GUNS, Page 6A

Dems release Epstein photos

Bart Jansen, Sarah D. Wire and Zachary Schermele
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON - House Democrats received another trove of 95,000 pictures from accused sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein's estate and released 19 images Dec. 12 that show Presidents Donald Trump and Bill Clinton and other high-profile figures. It was not immediately clear why Democrats on the House Oversight Committee chose to release these particular 19 photos, which included images of sex toys and, separately, snapshots of various VIPs whose past associations with Epstein were already widely known.

The photos were provided without any captions identifying or providing the occasions, dates, locations or context of the famous people shown in them. One picture shows Trump, who had a long friendship with Epstein in the 1990s and early 2000s, posing for a photo with women whose faces are blacked out. He is seen chatting or sitting next to women in various pictures. One portrays a sign for "Trump condom."

Trump has said he broke off ties before Epstein pleaded guilty to prostitution charges. He has consistently denied knowing about the late financier's abuse and accusations of sex trafficking of underage girls.

Other images show Clinton, director Woody Allen, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and Andrew Mountbatten Windsor, the former British prince. Allen is shown in one image talking to former Trump adviser Steve Bannon.

The photo release is the latest push by Democrats to encourage the Justice Department to release all of its files on Epstein's criminal investigation. Congress has set a Dec. 19 deadline for the release, under legislation Trump first opposed and later signed. Three federal judges have allowed the release of grand jury transcripts and other evidence from investigations of Epstein and his aide Ghislaine Maxwell.

More pictures

See some of the newly released images of the high-profile people in Jeffrey Epstein's emails at usatoday.com.

Rep. Robert Garcia of California, the top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee, told reporters Dec. 12 that he expects the committee to release more photos in the next few days as staffers continue looking through the images and make redactions to protect survivors.

Garcia said some of the photos staff have reviewed were unsettling, but he did not provide details. A spokesperson for the oversight committee, chaired by Republican James Comer of Kentucky, said Democrats were politicizing the investigation by "cherry-picking photos and making targeted redactions to create a false narrative about President Trump."

Contributing: Reuters

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Backcountry rangers hike to lend out a helping hand



Backcountry rangers Lydia Williams (left) and Jordan Gibeault dismantle an illegal campfire ring near Kephart Prong Shelter. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

Holly Kays

Special to the Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Backcountry rangers Lydia Williams and Jordan Gibeault have almost reached their destination, Kephart Prong Shelter, when they purposefully veer off-trail. They descend a slight hill, emerge into a small creekside clearing, and immediately turn their attention to a rocky outcrop protruding from the hillside. It's ringed with stones and filled with ash. "This is a great example of an illegal fire ring," Williams says. "Every time we come here, we're dealing with it again and again." Gibeault and Williams are two of the four rangers currently working in the park's Backcountry Office. This tiny team bears the giant responsibility of



Located just two miles from the trailhead on Newfound Gap Road, Kephart Prong Shelter is one of the park's busiest.

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MOUNTAINS

Let there be joy this holiday season



Devotional
Tim McConnell
Guest columnist

If you have been lighting the candles of the Advent wreath, you will soon come to the candle of joy. Whether you have candles of different colors, or maybe the same purple color, joy bursts out from the darkness and hopelessness just as angels did so long ago bringing joy to the world! The candle of joy!

In the letter that Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, we find words that just seem to pick us up and put a different spirit in our hearts. Yet at the same time we may find ourselves doubting whether we can really carry out this mandate. In the fourth chapter of Philip-pians, the verses 4-7, we find the chal-lenging call to, “Rejoice in the Lord al-ways. Again, I will say, rejoice!” Did Paul

really mean that we should be joyful all the time? I believe he did. You see, Paul wrote from the darkness of a Roman prison cell.

Jesus also thought it was extremely important for us to have joy in our lives. In the last conversation Jesus had with his disciples, he stressed the necessity of having joy. Jesus, even as he faced the torture of the cross, had the joy of obe-dience, knowing that he was following his Father’s will. Jesus said, “One of the last gifts that I would like to give to you is this same kind of joy that I have. The kind that exists even in the darkest of situa-tions. I want all my disciples to have this kind of joy that only I can give.”

One of the keys of joy is knowing with-out a doubt that we are loved; by God and also by others. God tells us of his love over and over in so many ways. We find that Advent proves that love.

Another key of joy is the realization that God holds us physically and spiri-

tually in his control. The psalmist tells us, “...his hand will lead us, and his right hand will hold us fast.” It should give us joy knowing that our hand is in the hand of God.

A third key to joy is the absence of fear. The 121st psalm tells us that God will keep us from all evil, keep us in his care no matter the circumstances. We serve a God who does not sleep, so why should we fear?

Someone has suggested these rules for joyful living;

Give something away- no strings at-tached

Do an act of kindness- and forget it

Spend a few minutes with an elderly person- their experience is priceless

Look intently into the face of a ba-by- and marvel

Laugh often- it is the oil that lubri-cates the wheels of life

Give thanks- a thousand times a day is not enough

Pray- or you will lose the way

Find God’s will for you- and work at it

Plan as though you will live forever- because you will

Live as though you will die tomor-row

If you have that unspeakable joy of salvation in your heart and life today, hold on to it with all your determination. Hold on by faithful prayer, searching his Word, and complete surrender to God. Resist fear, discouragement, and worry, because you are not alone. You are loved, cared for, and protected by a God who never gets tired. Even if you have lost the joy of salvation, it can be found again by pausing and listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit as he calls your name.

Let us claim our salvation and our joy, and then let us go out proclaiming joy to the world.

Rev. Tim McConnell, Francis Cove Global Methodist Church, December 13, 2025.

Smokies

Continued from Page 1A

patrolling the park’s 850 miles of hiking trails and monitoring its more than 100 backcountry campsites. Team members work four ten-hour days each week, typi-cally spending two of those days in the Backcountry Office at Sugarlands Visitor Center near Gatlinburg and the other two out on the trail.

“This small but mighty team of back-country rangers is essential to our efforts to care for trails, protect wilderness areas, and ensure the safety of our visi-tors,” said Acting Superintendent Charles Sellars. “They provide an inval-uable service—helping people craft safe and enjoyable itineraries and maintain-ing backcountry sites for overnight stays.”

In 2024 alone, the park recorded over 71,000 overnights in the backcountry, and the Backcountry Office fielded more than 10,000 phone calls—an average of nearly 30 calls per day, a figure that doesn’t count foot traffic to the office lo-cated within the park’s busiest visitor center. People call seeking everything from general park information to back-country permits and help with trip plan-ning. With every contact comes an op-portunity to convey important safety and resource protection information before visitors hit the trail. A lot of “really good conversations” happen in that office, said Williams, a native of Sevier County who has been a backcountry ranger since May 2020.

“It’s a really good balance,” she said. “It’s working with people, but also every-thing we do has a focus of resource pro-tection, and that’s what I want to do. I want to protect people from the resource, and to protect the resource from people.”

Williams and her colleagues report to Sugarlands every morning, either set-tling in for a day at the office, which is open every day but Christmas, or deploy-ing toward their assigned on-trail mis-sion. On a typical day, rangers might hike in to resolve a known issue, like a broken bear cable or full privy, or they might check in on a busy campsite like Kephart Prong, where they’re basically guaran-teed to find trash in need of collecting or illegal campfire rings in need of dispers-ing.

Other times, a lengthy drive and long hike might be scheduled to visit one of the park’s more remote campsites, which also need regular maintenance. Visiting Kephart Prong Shelter requires a 45-min-ute drive from Sugarlands and four-mile roundtrip hike, making it one of the more accessible sites. At the other end of the spectrum are destinations like Tricorner Knob Shelter, which requires a 20-mile roundtrip hike, or backcountry camp-



Backcountry rangers Orrin Carr (left) and Lydia Williams clean out a privy in the Cosby area. PROVIDED BY NPS

sites scattered along Fontana Lake, two hours away from Sugarlands and acces-sible only by boat. Those trips are now a bit easier than they used to be—Friends of the Smokies donated a boat earlier this year that the backcountry team uses to reach these sites.

“Having a boat allows us to get out there, educate folks, clean sites up, and assist visitors who are having issues,” said Williams. “So that’s been huge.”

In 2024, the backcountry team hiked a cumulative 1,968 miles. They packed out over half a ton of trash and abandoned gear, dismantled 70 illegal fire rings, in-stalled nine 35-pound metal fire rings, and emptied the waste from six privies.

“We’re almost like glorified backcoun-try janitors,” said Williams. “We’re the keepers of these facilities out here.”

It’s a description that is both apt and incomplete. Many backcountry ranger tasks could be considered janitorial, but these rangers are also highly skilled in the outdoors. They have an intimate knowl-edge of the park’s terrain, trails, and weather patterns—and a willingness to put their skills to use for anyone in need.

“You’re usually rolling into the shelter and there will be four or five backpackers sitting,” said Gibeault. “So that always evolves into something else.”

Rangers carry radios with them that they can use to contact the Backcountry Office even when they’re out of cell phone range, so when they encounter a back-packer who is behind on their intended itinerary or needs to change their plan due to incoming weather, they can check availability, suggest route adjustments, and issue permits accordingly.

“That, to me, is our most valuable ser-vice,” Gibeault said. “You’ll go up on the AT some days at peak season and change ten itineraries, that had they not run into you, they may have gone on ahead any-way and gotten hurt, or they may have gone to a different shelter out of compli-ance, and then the shelter’s overfull, so that’s dampening the visitor experience

for others who are within compliance.”

On a cold, rainy Tuesday morning, full shelters are not a problem on Kephart Prong Trail. The area is deserted when we arrive, and Williams and Gibeault lose no time in getting to work “brushing out” the illegal campsite. They use the avalanche shovels they’ve packed with them to dig ash from the campfire, scattering it in the nearby woods. Then they fill in the cavity with heavy rocks that had been used to ring the campfire. They sprinkle fallen leaves and branches over the rocks and bare earth nearby.

“A huge challenge of our job is just try-ing to change human behavior,” Williams says. “When we’re here cleaning up these spots that are not legal campsites, we’re thinking about, how do we train people away from this area? You’re just making it harder for them to do the wrong thing.”

Tent camping is not allowed at shelter sites in the park, and at all campsites, campers must use the facilities provid-ed—campsites, fire rings, privies, bear cables—rather than establishing their own. Reservations and permits are re-quired. There’s good reason for these rules, Gibeault said after he finished burying a wad of dirty toilet paper next to the site.

“These shelters are built strategically. Toilet areas have got to be 100 feet away from water sources. Of course, this is the water source,” he said, waving toward nearby Kephart Prong, “and when they’re camping down here, they’re using the bathroom there, and they’re not 100 feet away from the water source—so people are going to the bathroom essentially in the water source that people drink from. That’s pretty gross.”

Left unchecked, illegal sites tend to expand, causing ever-increasing envi-ronmental damage and wildlife conflicts. Overcrowded camping areas increase the odds that animals such as bears will be attracted by the scent of human food, perhaps bringing harm to themselves or their human neighbors.



Backcountry Ranger Lydia Williams crosses a bridge on Kephart Prong Trail as part of a maintenance trip to Kephart Prong Shelter. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

The rangers finish cleaning out the il-legal site in about 15 minutes, but their work is far from over. Next up is the shel-ter itself. They shovel out the fireplace and outdoor fire ring, carefully picking out any pieces of charred trash before spreading the ash. They make sure the bear cables are operational and remove an abandoned tarp and large log. Then they don plastic gloves to collect the frayed pieces of toilet paper scattered atop the sleeping platforms, the result of a left-behind roll that got wet and was then chewed by mice. We’re just about to turn around when Williams finds a sec-ond illegal campsite. She and Gibeault repeat a now-familiar procedure—scat-tering ash, moving rocks, covering the area with leaves and fallen limbs.

Small spots of blue sky peek around the clouds as we descend, and by the time we reach the trailhead, the day hikers are out in full force. Williams and Gibeault greet everyone we pass, between en-counters discussing where they might go next. It’s only noon, and they still have six hours left in their workday.

“It’s very rewarding work,” Williams said. “I feel very lucky.”

Salaries for backcountry rangers like Williams and Gibeault are paid using revenues from backcountry camping fees. Fees are currently set at \$8 per person, per night. For more information about backcountry camping, including a reservation portal, visit nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/backcountry-camp-ing.htm. Help support backcountry work by packing out what you pack in, mini-mizing your impact at campsites, and doing your research before hitting the trail.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member SmokiesLife, a nonprof-it dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.

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