

Biden suggests White House could act without Congress as part of gun control plan

Vice President Biden suggested Wednesday that the White House could take unilateral action on gun control, as he kicked off a round of meetings aimed at finding ways to curb gun violence.

The vice president met Wednesday with gun-safety and victims groups, saying he is "determined" to take "urgent action" to address gun violence.

"This is not an exercise in photo opportunities or just getting to ask you all what your opinions are. We are vitally interested in what you have to say," Biden said.

The White House has sought to avoid prejudging what Biden's recommendations would be. But the vice president hinted Wednesday that executive action -- action by the president in which Congress would not have a say -- would indeed be involved.

"Executive action ... can be taken," Biden said, adding "we haven't decided what that is yet."

He also said separate legislative action would be "required."

Among the gun-advocacy groups attending the meeting Wednesday were Arizona for Gun Safety, the Brady Campaign to End Gun Violence, the Campaign to Keep Guns off Campus and Mayors Against Illegal Guns.

The vice president will hear from the other side of the gun-control debate Thursday, when the nation's leading gun lobby meets face to face with his task force in what could be a testy session. The National Rifle Association confirmed to Fox News that the group accepted an invitation to meet with the task force, which is running up against an end-of-the-month deadline to produce a set of proposals.

The administration says mental health and the entertainment industry will likely be examined as part of that process. Biden has also scheduled a meeting with representatives from the entertainment and video game industries. But much of the discussion, and proposals from Democratic members of Congress, continue to center around gun control. The meeting Wednesday with gun safety groups will likely focus on those kinds of proposals.

The NRA has been at the helm of fighting those proposals ever since the group broke its post-Connecticut silence and called for a national school security plan to install armed officers at every school in the country.

The White House and the NRA have found little common ground as the two groups craft separate responses to the tragedy.

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney reiterated Tuesday that President Obama is "skeptical that putting more guns in schools would solve this problem."

It's unclear how the meeting Thursday will be structured. The NRA told Fox News that they are sending a representative to hear what the White House has to say. Carney, though, said the task force is "designed to get input" from others.

"Then the vice president's group will assess different actions," Carney said.

The Washington Post reported over the weekend that President Obama was considering measures beyond reinstating a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. According to the paper, the task force is considering measures like universal background checks for gun buyers, a national gun database, strengthening mental-health checks and tougher penalties for people carrying guns near schools or giving them to minors.

Asked Monday about the report, Carney reiterated that Obama wants to "close the many loopholes in our background check system" and "supports congressional actions right away."

Accelerated efforts to draft new gun control measures have alarmed gun rights groups, including the NRA, at the national and local levels. A separate last-minute effort to craft a restrictive semi-automatic weapon ban in Illinois was put on hold amid a tight deadline and intense opposition. On Capitol Hill, California Sen. Dianne Feinstein is again pushing a renewal of the federal assault-weapons ban.

But Congress is also slammed with a pressing set of deadlines regarding a host of fiscal issues -- the debt ceiling, automatic spending cuts and the federal budget itself.

Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell, the top Republican in the Senate, said the next round of fiscal deadlines will occupy the attention of Congress and push off the consideration of gun legislation for at least three months.

"There will be plenty of time to take a look at their recommendations once they come forward," McConnell said of Biden's upcoming proposals during an interview Sunday on ABC's "This Week."

Obama aides say the president still plans to act quickly on Biden's proposals.

"I believe most Americans would disagree with the idea that in the wake of what happened in Newtown, Conn., that we should put off any action on the issue of gun violence," Carney said Monday in response to McConnell's comments.

Biden's recommendations are likely to include proposals for legislation, as well as executive action Obama can sign into law without lawmakers' approval.

The president already has called on Congress to reinstate a ban on military-style assault weapons, close loopholes that allow gun buyers to skirt background checks and restrict high-capacity magazines.

Pro-gun lawmakers on Capitol Hill have said any comprehensive effort to respond to the Newtown shooting must include more than just tighter gun control.

In addition to Biden's meetings this week, Education Secretary Arne Duncan will meet with parent and teacher groups, while Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius will meet with mental health and disability advocates.

The White House said other meetings are also scheduled with community organizations, business owners and religious leaders.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.
