

Halvorson says she won't join Democrats on assault weapons ban

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By Rick Pearson Tribune reporter

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Debbie Halvorson found herself alone among leading Democratic candidates Sunday when she indicated she would not support a ban on the semiautomatic firearm used in the Sandy Hook school shooting last month.

The former one-term congresswoman from Crete took that position at a wide-ranging candidate forum in the 2nd Congressional District contest to replace former Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr.

Gun violence, including President Barack Obama's call for a semiautomatic assault weapons ban and a prohibition on large-capacity magazines, has grown into a major issue in the South Side and south suburban district—particularly given Chicago's recent history of gun-related murders. Nationally, the debate was fueled by last month's killing of 20 elementary school students in Newtown, Conn.

But in a crowded and fast-approaching Feb. 26 special primary, Democratic opponents attaching themselves to Obama's call for more gun laws are trying to isolate Halvorson, who has received past backing by the National Rifle Association.

"We've buried far too many of our own children over the years—every day. When are we going to go after the criminals? When are we going to go after the people who buy guns for those who aren't able to go get their backgrounds checked? We need to strengthen the laws we already have instead of keep talking about new ones," Halvorson said at the forum at Trinity United Church of Christ, 400 W. 95th St.

"We need to do more about the criminals. Cook County has an assault weapons ban. We have the highest amount of murders in the country. Let's do more about enforcing the laws we have at the same time doing more about keeping our streets safe," she said, adding she backs a universal background check and tougher criminal penalties on straw purchasers.

Though she handily lost a primary last March to Jackson, Halvorson is viewed as a leading candidate in the special primary with good name recognition and her status as the only white candidate among 17 Democratic contenders.

Robin Kelly of Matteson, a former state lawmaker, said she not only backed an assault weapons ban and universal background checks but also wanted the state to go no further on legalizing the carrying of concealed weapons. A federal appeals court recently ruled Illinois' ban on carrying firearms in public unconstitutional.

But Kelly, who has begun airing radio ads in support of her gun-control stance, made a veiled criticism of Halvorson at the forum when she said, "I got an F (grade) from the NRA, something I'm proud of. I don't have to go back and take the test and study anymore."

State Sen. Toi Hutchinson of Olympia Fields, who replaced Halvorson in the state Senate, also has had NRA backing in the past. Hutchinson, who did not attend the forum, has embraced Obama's call for tougher gun measures and co-sponsored a bill in Springfield to ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

Chicago Ald. Anthony Beale, 9th, noted his role in passing the city's 2010 ordinance to strictly regulate handguns, saying, "We need to take that leadership to Washington." Likening the need to curb neighborhood gun crime to the airport safety checks instituted after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, Beale said, "The planes are crashing in our community and we must act and act now."

New state Sen. Napoleon Harris, D-Flossmoor, was more reserved, saying the underlying issues of poverty, joblessness, family unrest and mental health issues need to be addressed first.

Disgraced former U.S. Rep. Mel Reynolds, forced to give up the seat after convictions that included having sex with an underage campaign worker, noted he co-sponsored the nation's previous assault weapons ban that expired in 2004.

But for her part, Halvorson was adamant against looking at a gun ban.

"I refuse to take a look at these wide ranging gun bans and pass one more law against a law abiding citizen until there is something done against those who get their guns illegally or criminal," she said after the forum.

"I'm with the president, first of all, that we must continue this national dialogue. For the first time ever, we've got this (gun issue) as something we're talking about and everybody's at the table," she said.

rap30@aol.com

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