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The hearse carrying the remains of Alex Schachter, 14, who was one of the 17 victims of the Parkland mass shooting, leaves the ale Marriott Coral Springs at Heron Bay in Parkland on Feb. 18, 2018. Schachter's aunt is among nt on the ballot that would ban military-style semi-automatic rifles in Florida. [Matias J. Ocner /

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Gun control activists carrying Parkland momentum into petition drive for amendment

Alex Schachter was among the first to die.

Carrying an AR-15-style semi-automatic rifle, Nikolas Cruz entered a classroom building at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland last year and opened fire.

Cruz killed three students in the first floor hallway and then started shooting through classroom windows. Schachter's language arts classroom was the first one targeted. The 14-year-old died in the room with two other

Cruz continued on with a killing spree that ultimately ended the lives of 17 people and shocked the nation.

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It has been nearly a year since the Parkland massacre and many people believe that lawmakers in Florida and across the country have not done enough to prevent another tragedy. Schachter's aunt, Gail Schwartz, is among them.

"This cannot be the new normal," Schwartz said. "We cannot accept this. We have to do something."

On Monday, Schwartz will hold a press conference to announce the public kickoff of a petition drive she is leading to put a constitutional amendment on the Florida ballot in 2020 that would ban "assault weapons," which the amendment defines as "semi-automatic rifles and shotguns capable of holding more than 10 rounds of ammunition at once, either in fixed or detachable magazine, or any other ammunition-feeding device."

Every day since Schachter's death has been a struggle, Schwartz said. Her family and Schachter's live close to each

"Try explaining to your children that they're never going to see their cousin again," she said. "That's not a conversation that anyone should ever have to make."

Schwartz believes her nephew — whom she described as "a wonderful, genuine, beautiful human being" — might be alive today if Cruz did not have access to such a deadly weapon.

A ban on on military-style semi-automatic rifles has been a goal of gun control advocates nationwide for years, ever since a federal ban expired in 2004. The issue gained prominence in Florida after the massacre at Orlando's Pulse nightclub, where 49 people were killed in 2016.

Florida Democrats have been pushing an assault weapons ban, but the bill has received a cool reception in the GOP-controlled Legislature.

Last year Democrats tried to attach an amendment banning assault weapons onto a larger school safety bill that was put forward in response to the Parkland shooting. The amendment failed by a 20-17 vote in the Florida Senate, with two Republicans joining 15 Democrats to vote in favor of the ban.

A bill banning assault weapons was been filed again for the 2019 legislative session, which begins March 5. But the likelihood of it passing is slim.

So gun control advocates are trying another approach, one that has proven effective in the past when it comes to issues that have significant public support but have struggled to gain traction in the Legislature.

"I think there is a better chance of getting a citizens initiative on the ballot than getting the current Legislature to seriously entertain an assault weapons ban," said Florida League of Women Voters President Patricia Brigham, whose group is supporting the initiative.

Constitutional amendments legalizing medical marijuana, automatically restoring voting rights for most ex-felons and promoting land conservation all have been approved by voters in recent years after citizen petition drives placed them on the ballot.

In addition to having broad popular support, all of the amendments had one thing in common: A well-funded signature-gathering campaign.

It takes 766,200 signatures get on the ballot. To reach that threshold requires spending millions on paid signature gatherers.

The campaign to ban assault weapons had collected \$439,888 as of Dec. 31, enough to get started. But it will take

And even if the proposed assault weapon ban gathers enough signatures to go before voters in 2020, polling indicates it is no sure thing.

A constitutional amendment needs 60 percent support to pass. A September poll conducted by Florida Atlantic University found only 50.7 percent of Florida voters support an assault weapons ban, down from 69 percent immediately after Parkland.

But 19.3 percent of voters surveyed in September were undecided on a ban, so there is still room for support to grow and reach the 60 percent threshold.

Gun rights supporters are likely to mount a campaign opposing the ban, though, which could influence public opinion.

The National Rifle Association is a major political force in Florida. The group's lead Florida lobbyist, Marion Hammer, did not return a message seeking comment on the proposed constitutional amendment.

Hammer spoke against an assault weapon ban when it was proposed last year as an amendment to the school safety bill approved by the Legislature. So did Florida Carry President Eric Friday.

"They don't like how a criminal used the weapon," Friday told a Senate committee last year, according to the Florida Politics website. "But that's not how they are widely used. It is time for the Legislature to realize this is an attempt to punish law-abiding citizens for the actions of one citizen."

Critics of banning assault weapons point out that the overwhelming majority are never used in a crime. Pistols are the weapon of choice in most gun deaths. Even the term assault weapon is controversial, with gun rights supporters saying it is vague and meant to evoke an emotional reaction.

Legislative leaders have been pushing a different approach to addressing the threat of gun violence in schools, including hardening such facilities, expanding mental health services and increasing the number of armed guards at schools. Lawmakers did enact some modest gun control measures last year, such as boosting the age limit for purchasing guns from 18 to 21, but have resisted a more aggressive approach to regulating firearms.

Heading into the 2019 legislative session, the focus so far among GOP leaders has been on expanding a controversial "guardian" program approved last year. The program allows certain school personnel to be armed, but most teachers were excluded.

Last month a state commission investigating Parkland recommended expanding the guardian program to allow any teacher who undergoes training to be armed

That recommendation is incorporated into legislation filed last week in the Florida Senate (SB 7030). The bill deletes language stating that teachers who "exclusively perform classroom duties" are excluded from the guardian program.

"We know from the history of these things that the majority are stopped by school personnel," Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri, who led the Parkland Commission, told the Associated Press last year. "People need to keep an open mind to it as the reality is that if someone else in that school had a gun it could have saved kids' lives."

The idea of arming teachers has been highly controversial, though. Many educators and lawmakers from both parties question the approach, and some families of Parkland victims also have voiced opposition.

Schachter's father — Max Schachter — was the only member of the Parkland commission to vote against including the recommendation to arm teachers in the final report.

"The answer to a gun problem is not having more guns," Brigham said. "Especially having teachers carry weapons. Teachers are there to teach. ... Having the additional burden of carrying a weapon is irresponsible and absurd."

The debate over gun control is no less emotional, and is likely to be one of the biggest issues in the 2020 campaign if the constitutional amendment makes it on the ballot.

For now, though, Schwartz and others are focused on building a broad coalition that can do the legwork needed to get the required signatures. Schwartz chairs the group Ban Assault Weapons Now, which includes current and former lawmakers, survivors of both the Pulse and Parkland shootings and family members of those who died.

Ban Assault Weapons Now recently joined forces with the group Americans for Gun Safety, which is led by prominent GOP fundraiser Al Hoffman Jr.. The co-chair of George W. Bush's presidential campaign in 2000, Hoffman became ambassador to Portugal under Bush. He formed Americans for Gun Safety after Parkland.

"This is a critical step to protecting future generations of Floridians," Hoffman said when the two groups joined forces in September.

The Americans for Gun Safety website lists a number of prominent Republicans among the group's supporters, including U.S. Rep. Brian Mast, former U.S. Rep. Carlos Curbelo and former Ambassador Mel Sembler. It also includes some top political donors, such as billionaire Mike Fernandez.

Mast is an Army veteran who lost both of his legs in a bomb explosion in Afghanistan. He won a second term in November. After Parkland, Mast wrote a New York Times op-ed expressing support for an assault weapons ban.

Mast wrote that he carried a rifle very similar to the one used to kill 17 people in Parkland, a community he once called home.

"We used it because it was the most lethal — the best for killing our enemies," Mast wrote. "And I know that my community, our schools and public gathering places are not made safer by any person having access to the best killing tool the Army could put in my hands."

Schwartz has been enlisting other veterans to help with the petition drive. She recently addressed a Sarasota meeting

of Florida Veterans for Common Sense by speaker phone.

Dave Siegwald, a FVFCS member from Sarasota who fired everything from grenade launchers to M16s and heavy machine guns during his military training and deployments as a Marine combat engineer platoon commander and company commander in Vietnam, wrote in an email that his group "believes in, and very strongly supports, the Constitution."

"Banning assault weapons is well within the boundaries of the Second Amendment," Siegwald wrote, adding: "It is time to pass legislation banning assault weapons before there is more senseless carnage."

Schwartz owns an insurance agency but she said the petition drive has become all consuming.

"Every waking moment I'm thinking about this and making plans on how to organize this and mobilize people throughout Florida," she said.

As the anniversary of the Parkland massacre approaches on Thursday, Schwartz said she is determined to keep other families from going through "the hell that my family is living through."

"I know this is the most important thing I've ever done in my life," she said. "We can do this just as citizens, we don't need any politician to tell us what guns should be sold."