

DeSantis rejects fed response for guns

Wants more action on fentanyl trade

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USA TODAY NETWORK

Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis explained in Iowa Friday why he's pushing for more federal action on fighting fentanyl trafficking but firearms regulation should be left to state and local governments.

The difference, DeSantis said, is U.S. borders.

Florida's governor who is campaigning in Iowa ahead of Caucus Day Jan. 15 — told the Des Moines Register and NBC News on Thursday, hours after multiple people were shot at a high school in Perry, that gun violence should be addressed at the state and local level — without any new federal restrictions on firearms.

"We obviously have a responsibility to create safe environments," DeSantis said in the interview at the Des Moines Register's office.

"The federal government is probably not going to be leading that effort. I think it is more of a local and state issue, but we've shown how it's done in Florida."

One sixth-grade student was killed and seven other students and staff were injured in a shooting Thursday morning at Perry High School that also left the shooter dead from a self-inflicted gunshot.

DeSantis has often focused in his presidential campaign on deaths caused by the synthetic opioid fentanyl, and he has cited those deaths — which he has called poisonings — as justification for limiting entry by undocumented migrants at the U.S. border with Mexico and taking military action against drug cartels.

DeSantis was asked after an event Friday in Cumming how he distinguishes what makes one issue a national focus and the other a local and state one.

DeSantis told reporters: "Firearms involve the federal government. I mean, Thomas (U.S. Rep. Massie of Kentucky) can tell you people that sell firearms



Republican presidential candidate Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis sits for an interview with Brianne Pfannenstiel of the Des Moines Register and Dasha Burns of NBC News in the Des Moines Register Newsroom on Thursday. ZACH BOYDEN-HOLMES/THE REGISTER

need to be federally licensed to be able to do it, to sell retail. So, there's a whole host — there's probably nothing that's more federally regulated, for context, probably the most regulated constitutional right of any, right?"

Massie, who campaigned Friday with DeSantis in Cumming, took it from there and said, "The fentanyl is coming across the border. I have a fairly libertarian view on this stuff. But at the border, this is our duty to enforce the border. And when you have drugs coming across the border, that makes it a federal, national issue."

"Yeah, I think for sure, and I think we're going to address it," DeSantis added.

The first and last questions DeSantis took from audience members in Cumming were about gun violence and reducing the number of mass shootings.

He praised authorities' response in Perry, which he credited as having "very likely saved lives," in contrast to the response to the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where he said, "Kids died as a result of that feckless response."

He also reiterated what he thinks are needed responses to gun violence: increased security at schools, interven-

tions for individuals with violent mental health issues, and tougher prosecutions for crimes.

"The federal government's role is secondary. The primary role is local and state. There are things I know they've worked on in Congress to provide some support. But parents out there can count on me as somebody that is going to put the safety of our kids and the safety of our schools on the front burner. It's important," DeSantis said.

The tragic history of school shootings in Iowa goes back decades — recently including fatal shootings in January 2023 at the Starts Right Here alternative program in Des Moines and in March 2022 outside East High School in Des Moines.

Other recent Iowa sites of high-profile and fatal gun violence include outside Cornerstone Church in Ames in June 2022 and at a Maquoketa Caves State Park campsite in July 2022.

In 2021, for the second straight year, gun deaths in the U.S., including homicides and suicides, reached the highest number ever recorded — nearly 49,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Gun violence was the leading cause of death for children and teens and accounted for more

than half of all deaths of Black teens.

The CDC reported firearm-related deaths in 2022 remained above 48,000, according to provisional mortality data.

Meanwhile, drug overdose deaths have also spiked in recent years, particularly involving synthetic opioids and primarily fentanyl, according to the CDC and National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Synthetic opioid overdose deaths driven by fentanyl killed 70,601 Americans in 2021, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

In 2022, provisional data indicated more than two-thirds of the reported drug overdose deaths in the U.S. involved synthetic opioids and principally illegally-manufactured fentanyl, according to a CDC report. That would be about 72,815 deaths from fentanyl in 2022.

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