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Funeral protest: Arizona rallies to foil Westboro Baptist Church

Funeral protest plans by Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, have been met with defiance in Arizona. Tucson residents say they'll block the protesters from getting to the mourners of Saturday's mass shooting. The state legislature has also passed a law to help.



Dozens gather at a makeshift memorial Monday in Tucson, Ariz., for Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, who is still in critical condition at the hospital, and other victims who were shot on Saturday. The Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, plans a funeral protest for the six people who died, angering Arizonans.

(Ross D. Franklin/AP)

By Lourdes Medrano, Staff writer

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Tucson, Ariz. —

Plans by the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, to picket the funerals of Saturday's shooting victims are being met by a concerted effort by citizens and lawmakers to keep protesters at bay.

State lawmakers Tuesday passed legislation that makes protests illegal within 300 feet of any home, house of worship, cemetery, or funeral home just before, during, or after a ceremony or burial.

Tucson residents also sprang into action when news of the planned protests spread. Many intend to meet the picketers with human barricades and some say they will wear oversize "angel wings" to shield mourners from seeing the protesters along the funeral routes.

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Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies are preparing to implement extra safety measures at the various funeral sites in the next few days to ensure that the protests and counterprotests don't get out of hand.

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"We're going to take every precaution we can to make sure there is no violence," says Deputy Renee Carlson of the Pima County Sheriff's Department. "We're going to make sure that everybody is safe at these events."

The controversial church, which consists mostly of the Rev. Fred Phelps and members of his family, believes that God is punishing America for its growing acceptance of gay rights by killing US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. The group also protested the funeral of Elizabeth Edwards, wife of former presidential candidate John Edwards.

The US Supreme Court is considering a case against the church's practice of protesting funerals, brought by the father of a US marine killed in Iraq.

Some Tucsonans, still grieving over the mass shooting, which left six dead and 14 wounded, including US Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D), say pickets at the funerals would be vile.

"I don't understand the logic; we have a tragedy here," says Phyllis Beckert, who with her husband, Mal, paid her respects Tuesday at a memorial of flowers, candles, and get-well messages in front of Congresswoman Giffords's Tucson office. Doctors say Giffords, who was shot in the head point blank Saturday, is breathing on her own and is alert and responsive.

Lizette Fimbres, a dental assistant, stopped by the makeshift shrine during her lunch break to write a note to the congresswoman. She finds hard to believe that anyone would protest at any funeral.

"That's just insane," she says.

The first scheduled service, for 9-year-old Christina Green, is scheduled for Thursday afternoon at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Classes at the church school have been canceled. Around the lunch hour Tuesday, a group of law enforcement agents arrived to inspect the grounds and meet with church workers.

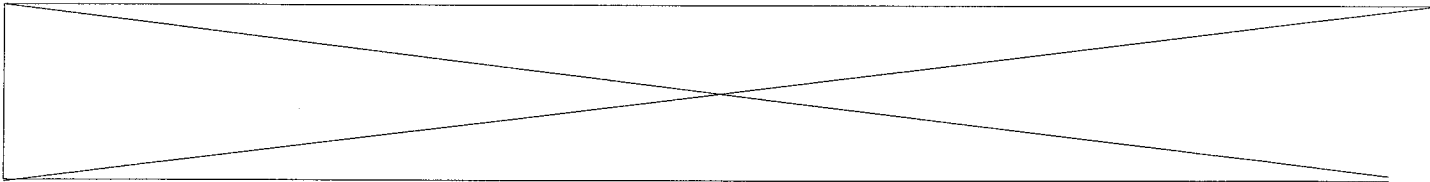
Christina had gone to Giffords's meet-and-greet event Saturday with a neighbor, Susan Hileman. The girl and his wife were holding hands when they were shot, Bill Hileman said at a news conference Tuesday.

Ms. Hileman, who was shot three times, survived.

His wife and the little girl "were generationally apart, but birds of one feather," Mr. Hileman said.

The law passed Tuesday intends to keep protesters away from the funeral. "This act is an emergency measure that is necessary to preserve the public peace, health, or safety and is operative immediately as provided by law," the new law states.

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