

Gun Shop Project Inception and Q&A

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In 2009 in New Hampshire, in the course of less than a week, three people (with no connection to each other) legally purchased a firearm from the same store and killed themselves within hours of the purchase. The Medical Examiner's office brought this to the attention of their mental health liaison, and a small group of firearm retailers and mental health/public health practitioners met to explore whether there is a role for gun stores in preventing suicide. The group was later adopted by the NH Firearm Safety Coalition. The co-chair of the coalition has remained the same, it is the owner of the gun shop who transacted the fatal sales.

The project, called The Gun Shop Project developed materials with and for firearm retailers and range owners on ways they can help prevent suicide. Its objectives are to:

- Share guidelines on how to avoid selling or renting a firearm to a suicidal customer
- Encourage gun stores and firing ranges to display and distribute suicide prevention materials tailored to their customers

The Gun Shop Project is now nationwide, and the NH Safety Coalition freely shares all their materials. In Wisconsin, the project was launched in Dane County. I was the person who ran this project for Dane County and received positive support from the NH coalition as I adopted their materials.

The Gun Shop Project was widely accepted by gun shop owners (just one gave push back) but time has not permitted for me to revisit the shops in Dane County to see how many maintain their materials. I give full support for this project. It takes some time to set up, train and to produce the materials and secure partners but the relationship between the gun shops and the community partners is invaluable.

The Gun Shop Project is most valuable because of the partnership it brought from suicide prevention advocates and gun shops. The foundation of the project is that safety is part of the gun and suicide prevention cultures. No one is immune from the tragedy of suicide, so with the focus on saving lives, there is a shared community-strengthening commitment for both partners, which fosters understanding and knowledge. This isn't anti-gun; this is anti-suicide.

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Realizing that impulsive firearms suicides (people who make a gun purchase and use it immediately in their death) are 10% of the firearm suicides, yet firearms make up about half of all suicides, it meant The Gun Shop Project would work even better if there was a role for gun shops for people who already own firearms. This realization was a nagging problem for me, but when I stopped at Essential Shooting Supplies in Mount Horeb, I found the gun shop owner, Chuck Lovelace, with the answer.

Please note that in your assembly bill, I see a promising mash up. You have drawn on the positive ideas of The Gun Shop Project (prevention materials available in the store for customers, training for gun shop personnel to prevent selling or renting to suicidal customers) but I see you also included Safe Storage. Safe Storage as a project, was the answer to my nagging problem of reaching out to firearm owners who may be in a temporary crisis.

The more Chuck and I talked, the more we realized that by letting gun shops be the site of safe, temporary, voluntary storage of firearms, we could help people who were in crisis, owned firearms, and needed a respectful and understanding local storage place. I explained to Chuck that only two evidence-based strategies were proven to prevent suicides: Have primary care physicians diagnose and treat depression and keep firearms out of the hands of people for the time they were in crisis. Firearm suicides are often the result of both long-term problems (substance misuse and untreated mental illness) and short-term problems (despairs like relationship problems, job and financial problems, isolation, loss, hopelessness, and a feeling of burdensomeness). During the time of these struggles, safe temporary storage of firearms, if not with a friend or family, could be offered at gun shops. As Chuck points out, he's not there to be your therapist, and he really doesn't need to know your personal trials, but he would very much like to have the role of providing safe, temporary storage of firearms. Safe Storage is voluntary, there is a small fee charged by the gun shop to keep it dignified and give the gun owner some skin in the game. Chuck and I developed paperwork for the storage, and Chuck can tell you more about the inventory details.

I support voluntary safe storage. Safe Storage holds enormous potential to save lives by providing safe temporary storage of firearms when people are in a crisis. A suicidal crisis can be transient, help can come in many forms for treatment, intervention, and support, but keeping people alive during this time and working hard to get them well takes an entire community—gun shops, coalitions, families, legislator

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The Gun Shop Project FAQ—Harvard School of Public Health—Means Matter

(taken directly from: www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/gun-shop-faq/)

A Q&A with the NH Firearm Safety Coalition

1. Won't a suicidal person just use something else if they can't get a gun?

Sometimes, yes. But almost every other method is less lethal than a firearm so there's a greater chance the person won't die in their attempt. Also, other methods allow time for rescue or give the ambivalent attempter some time to change their mind mid-attempt.

2. If a suicidal person substitutes another method and doesn't die, won't they eventually figure out a way to kill themselves later?

Suicidal feelings often pass over time. Studies that follow people over many years have found that roughly 90% of those who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide, including those who made a very serious attempt, like jumping in front of a train.

3. Suicide is a sensitive subject—I'm concerned about offending my customers or making them feel uncomfortable.

It's true this is a difficult subject, but it's also true that thoughtful conversations about hard topics can produce good outcomes, in this case even save lives. A customer might see our poster or brochure in your store, for example, and talk to his newly divorced brother about letting him hold onto his guns until his deep depression lifts. Your store may have just helped save a life without your even knowing it. That said, it is very important to us to ensure our materials share information in a respectful manner. Please let us know what you hear!

4. Suicide is a personal choice—it's your right to end your life. Who am I to intervene if someone doesn't want to live anymore?

Suicide is certainly a personal choice. Some people attempt suicide after a lot of deliberation and are virtually certain life is no longer worth living. But many attempt during a crisis and most are ambivalent. Over half of attempters report less than an hour passed between deciding on suicide and making the attempt, according to several studies. Often people who have survived serious attempts say something like: "The moment I jumped I said to myself...What did I just do? I don't want to die..." Also, thousands of people in their teens and twenties kill themselves each year in the U.S.—too young an age to give up on life.

5. Does relocating the guns for a while always work?

Reducing access to firearms and other lethal means is only part of a broader suicide prevention plan. Those considered actively suicidal are best protected by not being left alone until they are feeling better. Getting professional help and the support of other family and friends is strongly advised. The Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and is available 24/7.

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6. I'm concerned I'll be sued if I refuse to make a sale or rent a firearm to someone who passes the background check.

The two largest gun shops in NH and ME have never been sued for this reason. Stores and ranges are NOT violating 2nd amendment rights by refusing a purchase or rental if we suspect something isn't right; it is well within our legal rights to deny a transaction (as long as this denial is not simply based on a person's race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or sex). In fact, there have been instances where store owners have been sued by the family of someone who purchased a firearm and killed themselves soon after.

7. Customers could be acting funny for other reasons besides suicide—first time customers are often a little nervous and don't know anything about guns.

It's hard to know for sure if someone is suicidal. The Tip Sheet is meant to help your staff identify customers who exhibit some "red flags." Usually new customers are eager to hear purchasing advice from staff and will gladly respond to questions we may ask as we try to help them select the best firearm for their purposes. It's those who are reluctant to converse with staff about the purchase, or who seem to be troubled, who require extra caution. You should "go with your gut" and your experience.

8. The Tip Sheet says one in ten firearm suicides were with recently purchased guns. That sounds like a lot—I've been in business for many years and never thought a customer was suicidal.

It sounded like a lot to us, too. But that number comes straight from the office of the NH Medical Examiner. When the ME's office investigates a death, sometimes they'll find a receipt for the gun in the victim's pocket or next to the gun, so they know it's a recent purchase. Hopefully you and your staff will never come across a suicidal customer but being prepared should that unfortunate day come could save a life.

9. I have had a customer purchase a gun for suicide, and he didn't exhibit ANY warning signs at all. You can't always spot people who are serious about killing themselves.

There's no way all suicides can be prevented. But there have been occasions when a dealer asked a person who seemed shaky whether they should really be buying this gun and they admitted they were considering suicide. One family wrote our co-Chair (owner of Riley's Sports Shop) and said that his question saved their mother's life. The more ambivalent someone is about suicide, the greater the opportunity for intervention.

10. What do I say to a customer who keeps a gun at home for self-defense but is worried about someone at home who's going through a rough time?

It depends on how that gun is stored. If a customer's loved one at home (or with keys to their home) is going through a rough time, they may want to re-evaluate the accessibility of that firearm to that person. Suicide may be the bigger threat that your customer has to guard against in the short term until the situation improves.