

# Firearm Injury Prevention: Pilot and Evaluation at a Rural VA Healthcare System

With funding from the VA Office of Rural Health, VA Portland researchers and VA Alexandria health care facilities partnered to develop and test firearm injury prevention strategies in a rural Louisiana VA with high rates of firearm injury and death. Preliminary evaluation findings show that strategies were acceptable to Veterans and VA clinicians. Firearm Safety Week events were engaging for Veterans and led to increased community engagement around firearm injury and suicide prevention.

## Key Findings

- An **Implementation Advisory Group** composed of VA Portland, Oregon and VA Alexandria, Louisiana staff led the pilot effort and co-developed project materials. This collaboration was essential to successful implementation and evaluation.
- Two firearm injury prevention strategies were developed: an **educational campaign about secure firearm storage** (implemented Spring 2023) and **Veteran access to firearm storage devices at reduced cost** (implementation ongoing).
- Educational materials, including a **handout and videos**, were displayed and **Firearm Safety Week** activities were implemented at VA Alexandria Medical Center and affiliated clinics.
- Preparation for and staffing Firearm Safety Week events was **feasible and acceptable** to VA staff and Veterans were also **amenable** to the events.
- Firearm Safety Week events prompted **subsequent invitations** for VA Alexandria Mental Health staff to present to other local VA clinics and community organizations, supporting ongoing outreach and firearm suicide prevention efforts.

## Background

Now in its fourth year of funding from the VA Office of Rural Health, the focus of this year's "Prevention of Firearm Injuries Among Rural Veterans in the U.S." project, led by VA Portland, includes pilot implementation and formative evaluation of firearm injury prevention strategies with rural VA partners. VA Alexandria Health Care System (HCS) was selected from among VAs that serve predominantly rural-residing Veterans and treat high rates of firearm-related injuries or deaths. Leadership and providers at VA Alexandria HCS identified firearm injury prevention strategies they were interested in piloting, consistent with the **overarching project goal to normalize conversations about firearm safety within VA healthcare environments**. To support our partnership and facilitate implementation and evaluation, an Implementation Advisory Group (IAG) of VA Portland researchers and VA Alexandria HCS members in leadership positions from Mental Health and Primary Care services meets monthly. In March 2023, VA Portland team members traveled to VA Alexandria HCS for in-person meetings and program development.

## Strategy Development and Implementation

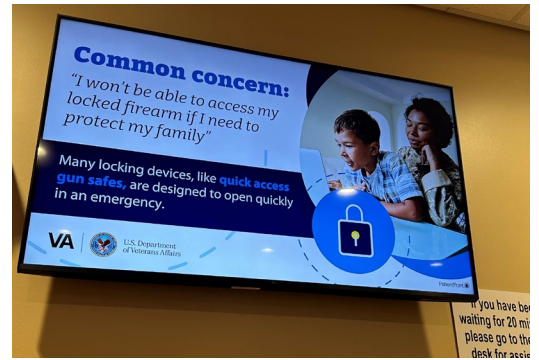
For our first injury prevention strategy, **an educational campaign about secure firearm storage**, our VA Portland team identified and developed educational materials, including videos and a handout about secure firearm storage and reasons to securely stage and store firearms. To explore acceptability of materials among Veterans and firearm owners, we received feedback from VA Portland's Veteran Engagement Group, IAG members, and several community members who own firearms. Inspired by VA Tennessee Valley's Firearm Safety event, we helped VA Alexandria prepare to host their own Firearm Safety events. We also presented the firearm injury prevention pilot strategies at meetings for VA Alexandria Psychiatry, Medical Staff, and Patient-Aligned Care Team providers.

For our second injury prevention strategy, **Veteran access to firearm storage devices at reduced cost**, we developed partnerships with several national firearm safe manufacturers. Two manufacturers plan to offer Veteran discounts in a format that allows quantifying how many Veterans use the discounts. We are in discussion with Veterans Canteen Service (VCS) about ways to expand the range and cost of firearm storage devices offered to Veterans online and in stores. We identified and included, in Firearm Safety event materials, the existing 10% retailer Veteran discounts on firearm storage devices.

## Activities

### Educational Campaign

The educational handout is displayed and multiple videos are played on large monitors in lobbies, patient waiting areas, and the cafeteria at VA Alexandria’s Medical Center and three of its affiliated community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs).



Examples of videos (left and right) and handout (center) that are part of the educational campaign about secure firearm storage.

To view videos, please click the hyperlinks:

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[https://patientpoint365-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/april\\_albrecht\\_patientpoint\\_com/ERS5A01vAOhBuLziAdUbARYBJd50P1OyFc6955UBGpa6Zw?e=LNCpoc](https://patientpoint365-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/april_albrecht_patientpoint_com/ERS5A01vAOhBuLziAdUbARYBJd50P1OyFc6955UBGpa6Zw?e=LNCpoc)

[The Veterans Crisis Line: Firearm Safety - YouTube](#)

In addition, we jointly planned and implemented **Firearm Safety Week** events at VA Alexandria’s Medical Center and CBOCs during Mental Health Awareness Month, May 2023. Our VA Portland team procured manufacturer-donated firearm safes - ensuring that a range of models and price points were available for demonstration - and assisted with publicity materials and talking points for event staff. VA Alexandria partners publicized the events on campus and through Facebook and a local news station (<https://www.kalb.com/video/2023/05/15/firearm-safety-week/>), coordinated staffing and set-up, and engaged actively with Veterans and caregivers at events. They also created **firearm suicide prevention kits** with VA cable locks, chamber flags (to indicate a firearm’s chamber is empty), and suicide prevention resources. During Firearm Safety Week, Mental Health staff at each site set up tables in high-traffic locations (e.g., the main lobby of CBOCs and near the cafeteria and main elevator banks at the Medical Center) to display demonstration firearm safes and distribute kits,

flyers with 10% Veteran retail discounts on firearm storage or locking devices, and other free suicide prevention materials such as magnets, pens, and bandanas imprinted with Veterans Crisis Line information.



Firearm Safety Week tables at Lafayette Main CBOC and Natchitoches CBOC that display and demonstrate a variety of firearm storage devices.

## Formative Evaluation Findings

VA Portland's team adapted or developed formative evaluation measurement tools including a survey for Veterans exposed to print and video educational materials during VA healthcare visits; an observation guide we used during Firearm Safety events; and a guide for implementation reflections from Firearm Safety event staff and IAG members. Survey data collection is in process. Below we present a summary of other formative findings.

### Implementation of Strategies

Our evaluation showed successful implementation of strategies. The educational handout is posted in the lobby at each of the four facilities. Videos are played approximately every 13-20 minutes in waiting room spaces. Each of the four facilities hosted Firearm Safety events during the same week in May, with VA Alexandria's Facebook reach representing 1,467 unique users who saw posts publicizing these events. Event staff demonstrated a range of firearm safes, discussed storage features with Veterans, offered flyers for discounted storage devices, and distributed firearm suicide prevention kits. Overall, 273 kits were distributed. Additional people (Veterans, caregivers, and other VA staff) engaged at events but did not take a kit. Based on our observations, event staff seemed familiar with the topics and were welcoming and enthusiastic and Veterans and caregivers were curious about the materials. In particular, the demonstrations of firearm safes were attention-getting and prompted people to approach and engage with event staff to learn more about secure storage options. Multiple Veterans mentioned they were not familiar with quick-access firearm safes like those demonstrated.

### Feedback from VA partners

Preparation for and staffing of Firearm Safety events was feasible and acceptable to Alexandria VA partners and event staff. Partners recommended additional publicity approaches and table signage for future events. A suggestion to support Veteran engagement was to have some event staff visibly

identified as Veterans (e.g., by wearing a hat with their military emblem). Scheduling during Mental Health Awareness month facilitated staffing for Firearm Safety events. Suicide Prevention staff noted that firearm safes grabbed Veterans' attention and opened the door to the oftentimes difficult conversation of firearm suicide prevention. One VA staff member described the demonstration safes as "the secret sauce" to easily beginning a conversation about firearm suicide prevention.

In addition, Mental Health staff received subsequent requests from VA providers for suicide prevention kits and invitations from multiple community organizations (including Veterans service organizations and a community-based summer event) to display demonstration firearm safes and distribute suicide prevention materials. This community interest was seen as a valuable result of the Firearm Safety events and will support ongoing outreach by Suicide Prevention staff.

## Next Steps

Implementation of the two firearm injury prevention strategies continues with the development of new educational materials and ongoing discussions about Veteran discounts with VCS and with firearm safe manufacturers. We anticipate receiving Veteran survey feedback on educational materials this quarter. The IAG members are exploring additional opportunities to highlight both strategies this Fall, informed by formative evaluation findings to date. Having recently received another year of funding from the Office of Rural Health, the VA Portland team plans to continue supporting and evaluating implementation at VA Alexandria. At the same time, we will expand to partner with an additional VA facility at another rural location and similarly pilot locally meaningful firearm injury prevention strategies.