

Campaign to reduce firearm suicide wins support among firearm retailers in New Hampshire

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Nearly half (48%) of firearm retailers in New Hampshire displayed materials from a firearm suicide prevention campaign generated by a coalition of gun owners and public health professionals, according to a new study led by Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) researchers. It is the first collaboration between firearm retailers and public health professionals around suicide prevention.

The study appeared online October 28, 2014 in *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*.

Following a spate of suicides in 2009 in New Hampshire involving recently-purchased firearms, the New Hampshire Firearm Safety Coalition initiated a study of the problem and discussed ways in which it could be addressed. Composed of firearms retailers, other firearms rights advocates, and suicide prevention experts, the coalition identified all commercial firearm retailers in the state and conducted structured interviews to discuss the role of firearm access in [suicide prevention](#) and obtain input on draft campaign materials. Packets of final campaign materials for both firearm retailers (providing tips to reduce the odds of selling a firearm to someone who may be suicidal) and their customers (encouraging customers to consider off-site storage if someone at home is suicidal) were mailed to all firearm retailers, and stores were visited unannounced six months later to assess their response to the packets.

"We were quite pleasantly surprised to discover so many stores had the materials we developed for their customers on display," said lead author Mary Vrinotis, who conducted this work while at Harvard School of Public Health and is now a researcher at the American Institutes for Research in Washington D.C. "I knew from conducting many of the interviews while developing materials that retailers were very thoughtful about this issue, but conveying a message to one's customers indicates a willingness to put thought into action."

The only factor identified in the study that was related to a store's likelihood of displaying campaign materials was the owner's belief that reducing a suicidal person's access to firearms could save a life: 69% of those who believed this displayed campaign materials, whereas only 41% of retailers who did not believe this displayed these materials.

"I'd hate to think a gun I sold was used in a suicide, and others feel the same way," said study co-author Ralph Demicco, former owner of Riley's Sports Shop in Hooksett, NH and co-chair of the coalition. "That's why we're learning about warning signs and spreading an additional message of gun safety to our customers: If you're worried someone is suicidal, offer to hold on to their guns until they are in a better place."

"This coalition demonstrates that there is common ground and even overlap between the gun-owning community and the [public health](#) community," said study co-author Elaine Frank, co-chair of the coalition and director of a program at Dartmouth College to counsel health care professionals on reducing a suicidal person's access to lethal means. "Legislative approaches to improving firearm safety tend to get stuck, but when an atmosphere of respect is cultivated around a shared goal, it is possible to avoid polarizing debate even around a subject as contentious as firearms—not only possible, but critical if progress in saving lives is to be made. We are pleased that this project is now being

replicated in multiple states around the country."

More information: "A Suicide Prevention Campaign for Firearm Dealers in New Hampshire," Mary Vrinotis, Catherine Barber, Elaine Frank, Ralph Demicco, and the New Hampshire Firearm Safety Coalition, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, online October 28, 2014, [DOI: 10.1111/sltb.12123](https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12123)

Provided by Harvard School of Public Health

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