A photograph of an older man with grey hair, wearing safety glasses and large black headphones, aiming a handgun in a shooting range. He is wearing a light grey long-sleeved shirt. The background shows a wooden structure with large windows overlooking a green landscape.

Pushing on an Open Door: Gun Owners Groups & Suicide Prevention

Catherine Barber – Harvard School of Public Health - SAFE STATES 2017
Above, Utah Suicide Prevention Coalition PSA



Traditionally suicide prevention has focused on who takes their life, when, where, and especially why.



We are beginning to understand that how people attempt suicide plays a crucial role in whether they live or die.

Engaging Gun Owners

- Gun owners and their families are dying by suicide at higher rates than non-gun owners.
- They're not more likely to have a mental illness or to be suicidal; they are more likely to die should they become suicidal.
- Ten years ago, most suicide prevention groups wouldn't talk about guns.
- People thought talking about guns meant talking about gun control and clammed up.
- Efforts like Means Matter and CALM pushed the concept that gun owners are OUR people and it's irresponsible to ignore the issue.

Engaging Gun Owners

- How do we reach gun owners at risk of suicide?
- With an anti-gun agenda? No
- That's like sending an anti-gay group to do a suicide prevention campaign in the gay and lesbian community.
- If you don't trust the messenger, you don't trust the message. And you're going to get the message wrong.

What's the Message

Woman: “I’m really worried about my husband; his depression’s getting worse and now with this second DUI, I’m worried he might consider suicide.”

Confidante (Therapist, neighbor, hotline worker, divorce attorney, etc.): “Is there somewhere you can store your guns away from home for now, or otherwise make them inaccessible until things improve?”

- Years ago “designated driver” and “friends don’t let friends drive drunk” were unknown concepts.
- How do we get that same reach and friends-protecting-friends approach to lethal means safety?

Disseminating the Message

- Clinicians
 - Gatekeepers
 - Gun-owning Community
- Lethal Means Counseling
- Expanding firearm safety to include suicide prevention

Firearms: Raising the Issue

How you raise the issue with a person at risk of suicide can make a difference

A “Do you have guns at home?”

vs.

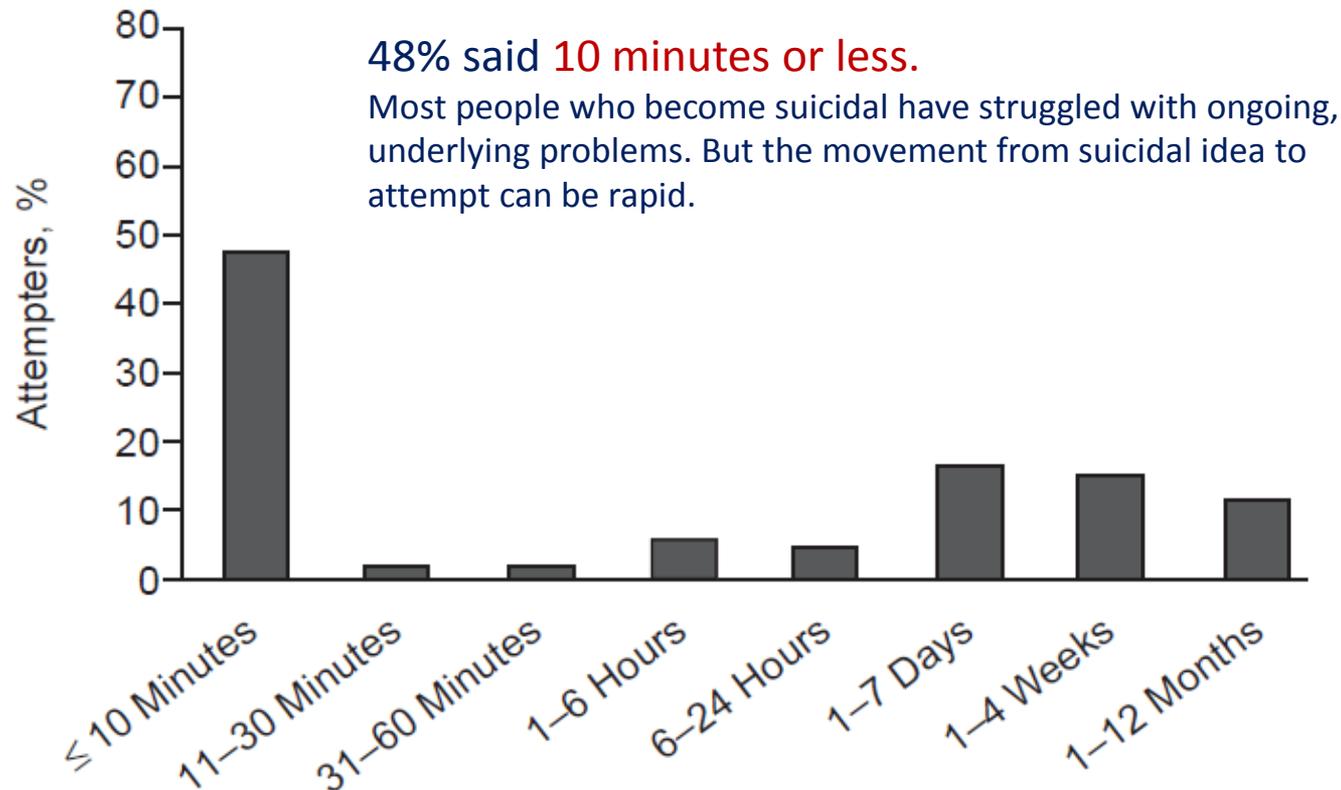
B “Lots of us in Colorado have guns at home. What some gun owners in your situation do is store their guns away from home until they’re feeling better, or lock them and ask someone they trust to hold onto the keys, or put their keys in a safe deposit box at the bank. If you have guns at home, I’m wondering if you’ve thought about a strategy like that.”

Considerations

- Option A
 - May discourage disclosure
 - May raise fears about what will happen if patient discloses guns at home. Doesn't make it clear that the provider is suggesting voluntary steps under the patient's control
- Option b
 - Normalizes gun ownership
 - Gives a peer example
 - Makes it clear that the provider is suggesting steps that are voluntary and under the patient's control
 - Imparts the information even if the patient opts not to disclose that there are guns at home

Timing & Suicidal Crises

People who attempted suicide were asked how long before the act they first thought about making the attempt.



“Inoculation” approach

- Consider delivering the firearm safety message even if the person states he/she is not suicidal but is really struggling

“I’m glad to hear you’re not feeling suicidal. Sometimes a crisis hits and people who are already struggling suddenly experience strong suicidal feelings. Those feelings often go away in a matter of hours or days, but they can feel overwhelming. If a period like that hits, I want to be sure you make it through safely and call for help. One step to take right now to protect yourself would be to store your guns away from home until you’re feeling better.”
(continue with brief safety planning)

SAFETY Study

Clinical trial in 5 Colorado EDs testing the impact of lethal means counseling training on family storage of medications and firearms following a psych ED visit by an adolescent.

Printed Handouts to Parents

- Information on why and how to store firearms away from home and locking meds when a family member is struggling
- Specific info on local firearm storage options



Free medication lockbox (1 per family)



Free mini gun safe (1 per gun-owning family)



Free cable locks (unlimited) For use on unsecured guns at home that do not fit in the mini-safe.



Disseminating the Message

- Clinicians
 - Gatekeepers
 - **Gun-owning Community**
- Lethal Means Counseling
- Expanding firearm safety to include suicide prevention

Good Messengers

- Firearm instructors, gun owner groups, gun magazine writers, sportsmen clubs, gun shop owners –these are great messengers
- Most gun groups have a **strong safety culture**—strong values around firearm safety, protecting the family, neighbors looking out for one another.
- These values dovetail well with suicide prevention
- Expanding gun groups' focus from preventing unintentional firearm deaths (500/yr) to preventing firearm suicides (22,000 deaths a year) is a good fit.
- When approached as **part of the solution, not part of the problem** gun owner groups have participated enthusiastically

Pushing on an Open Door



Firearm Instructors

- Do firearm classes currently cover suicide?
- Are instructors open to covering suicide?
- How do they and their students respond to suicide prevention training?

Do Firearm Classes Cover Suicide?

AUDIT

- Volunteers attended 20 introductory-level handgun classes throughout New England and PA.
- Audit results:
 - Safety content focused on accident prevention
 - 90% of the instructors did not cover suicide
 - That's the bad news
 - The 2 who did had both been exposed to Means Matter training

Are Instructors Open to Covering Suicide?

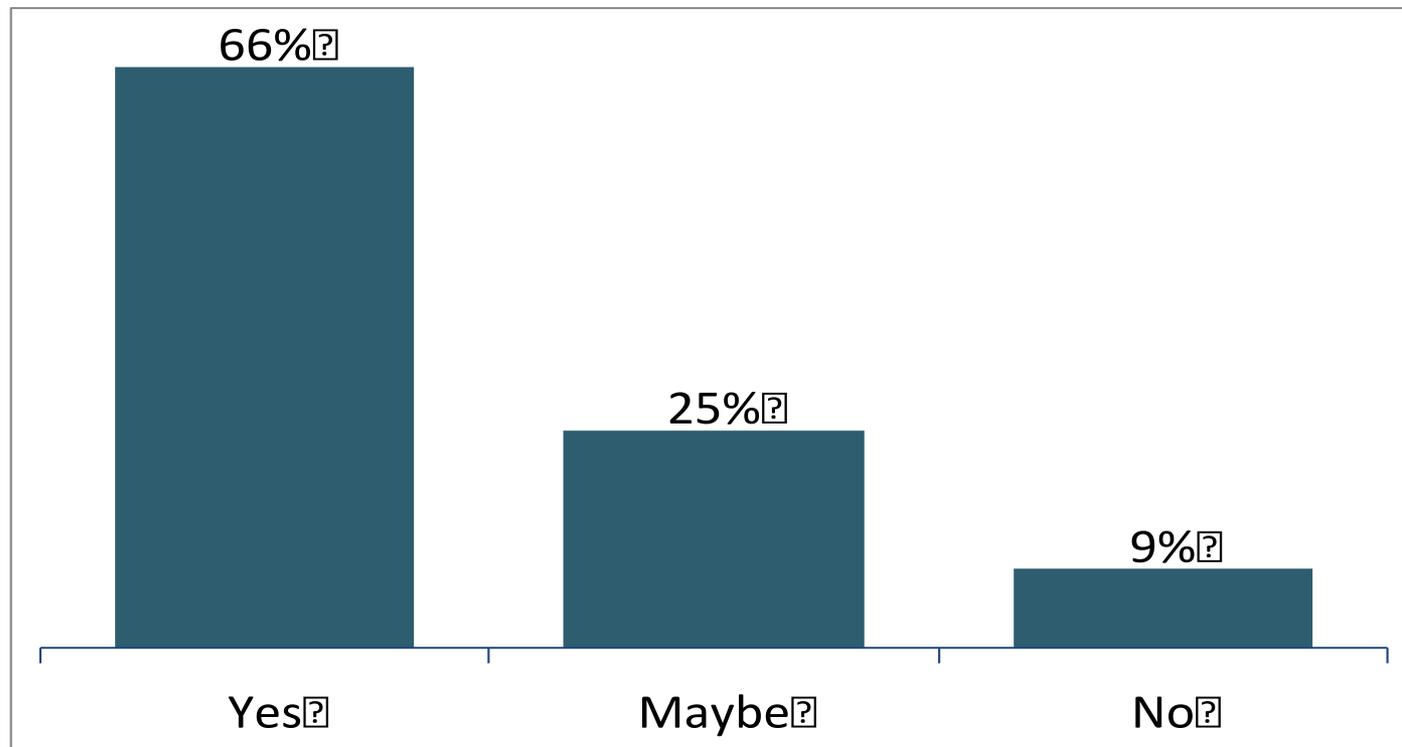
SURVEY

- Means Matter pitched adding a suicide prevention module to Utah Concealed Carry Permit classes. The Utah suicide prevention coalition and gun rights folks with leadership from Utah Shooting Sports Council (USSC) were firmly in support. Dept of Public Safety agreed.
- USSC was struck that 86% of firearm deaths in Utah were suicides
- Pretested the module with a small group of instructors
- Surveyed 1,005 instructors nationally.
- Showed them the draft 5-minute suicide prevention module to get their advice and input.

Acknowledgments: Clark Aposhian, Rep. Steve Eleason, Kim Myers, BCI, and members of the Utah Suicide Prevention Coalition's firearm safety committee

Utah Survey – Results

Would you be interested in briefly covering suicide prevention in your firearm classes? (asked after viewing module)



Online survey; n=1,005 firearm instructors certified by the Utah Department of Public Safety to teach its class for concealed carry permit seekers



Clark Apposhian, head of Utah Shooting Sports Council – 5 minute video demonstrating how to teach the Suicide Prevention module <https://vimeo.com/176189702>

How Do Instructors and Students Respond?

FOCUS GROUP

- NH Firearm Safety Coalition is creating a short video on suicide prevention for use in firearm classes
- Circulated word inviting instructors to watch the video
- Five instructors participated
- Video shows a couple finishing up at a shooting range. They're concerned about a distressed family member and stop by his house. They express their concern, ask to hold onto his guns, and invite him out to dinner. Voice over gives data and information about suicide prevention.
- “Protect your family, your firearms, and your freedom.”

NH Focus Group

- All 5 had never covered suicide prevention content.
- All 5 plan to now-- to save lives and preserve freedom
- One directs the Second Amendment Foundation's Training Division. Within two weeks he had:
 - Committed to adding brief content on suicide prevention to all SAF's basic classes.
 - Featured the issue on his radio program.
 - Tested the video in his next class. Student comments were positive, e.g. "this wasn't on my radar before and now it will be."
 - He heard comments in his class that he hadn't heard in 30 years of teaching

Firearm Instructors

- Do firearm instructors currently cover suicide?

Mostly no

- Are firearm instructors open to covering suicide?

Mostly yes

- How do instructors and students respond to suicide prevention materials?

Mostly very positive, especially when presented in a gun-friendly setting.

Utah PSA

<https://vimeo.com/175761640>

- It's a tale of resilience and recovery.
- It's gun-friendly.
- It speaks to middle-aged and older white male gun owners.
- It's a solid "bro" way to support and protect a friend in crisis.
- It normalizes temporarily and voluntarily storing guns away from home when struggling.
- It doesn't wait for disclosure of suicidal thoughts, it catches people further upstream when they're struggling.
- It doesn't rely on the distressed person asking for help.

New Hampshire Gun Shop Project

- Coalition of gun retailers, suicide prevention people, and gun rights activists met together to examine whether there was a role for gun shops in preventing suicide.
- Jointly developed customer education materials for gun shops in NH with input from gun shop owners.



2012 NHFSC Members. Pictured: Ralph Demicco (Riley's Guns), Elaine deMello (NAMI-NH), Howard and Sarah Brown (GO-NH), Mary Vriniotis (Harvard), David Welsh (legislator), Elaine Frank (CALM), Elizabeth Fenner-Lukaitis (state health dept). **Regular Members Not Pictured:** Cathy Barber (Harvard), Tom Brown (firearm instructor), Natalie Riblet (Dartmouth), John Yule (Wildlife Taxidermy and Sports [gun shop])



CONCERNED ABOUT A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND?

ARE THEY SUICIDAL?

- Depressed, angry, impulsive?
- Going through a relationship break-up, legal trouble, or other setback?
- Using drugs or alcohol more?
- Withdrawing from things they used to enjoy?
- Talking about being better off dead?
- Losing hope?
- Acting reckless?
- Feeling trapped?

SUICIDES IN NH
far outnumber homicides

**FIREARMS ARE THE
LEADING METHOD**

**ATTEMPTS WITH A GUN
ARE MORE DEADLY**
than attempts with other methods



HOLD ON TO THEIR GUNS

- Putting time and distance between a suicidal person and a gun may save a life.
- For other ways to help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: **1-800-273-TALK (8228)**



GUN SAFETY RULES

11 10 COMMANDMENTS
OF GUN SAFETY

Look inside
to see
what's new!

11. Consider temporary off-site storage if a family member may be suicidal. When an emotional crisis (like a break-up, job loss, legal trouble) or a major change in someone's behavior (like depression, violence, heavy drinking) causes concern, storing guns outside the home for a while may save a life. Friends as well as some shooting clubs, police departments, or gun shops may be able to store them for you until the situation improves.

New Hampshire Gun Shop Project

- Packets were mailed to all 65 independent gun shops in New Hampshire.
- 48% of the shops were observed displaying at least one of the materials during unannounced visits after the mailing.

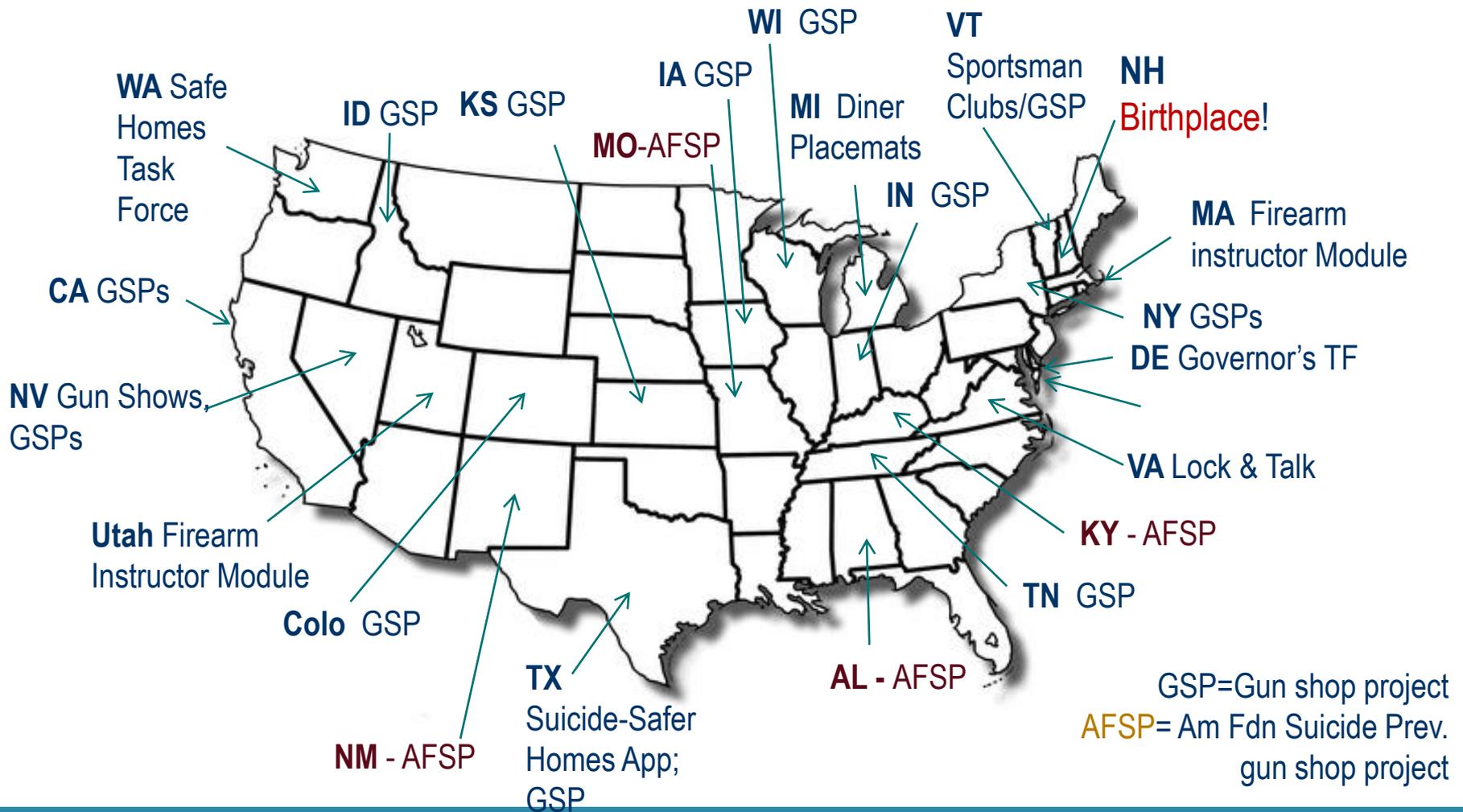
Pushing on an Open Door



Gun Partnerships - 2009



Gun Partnerships - 2016





FIREARMS AND SUICIDE PREVENTION



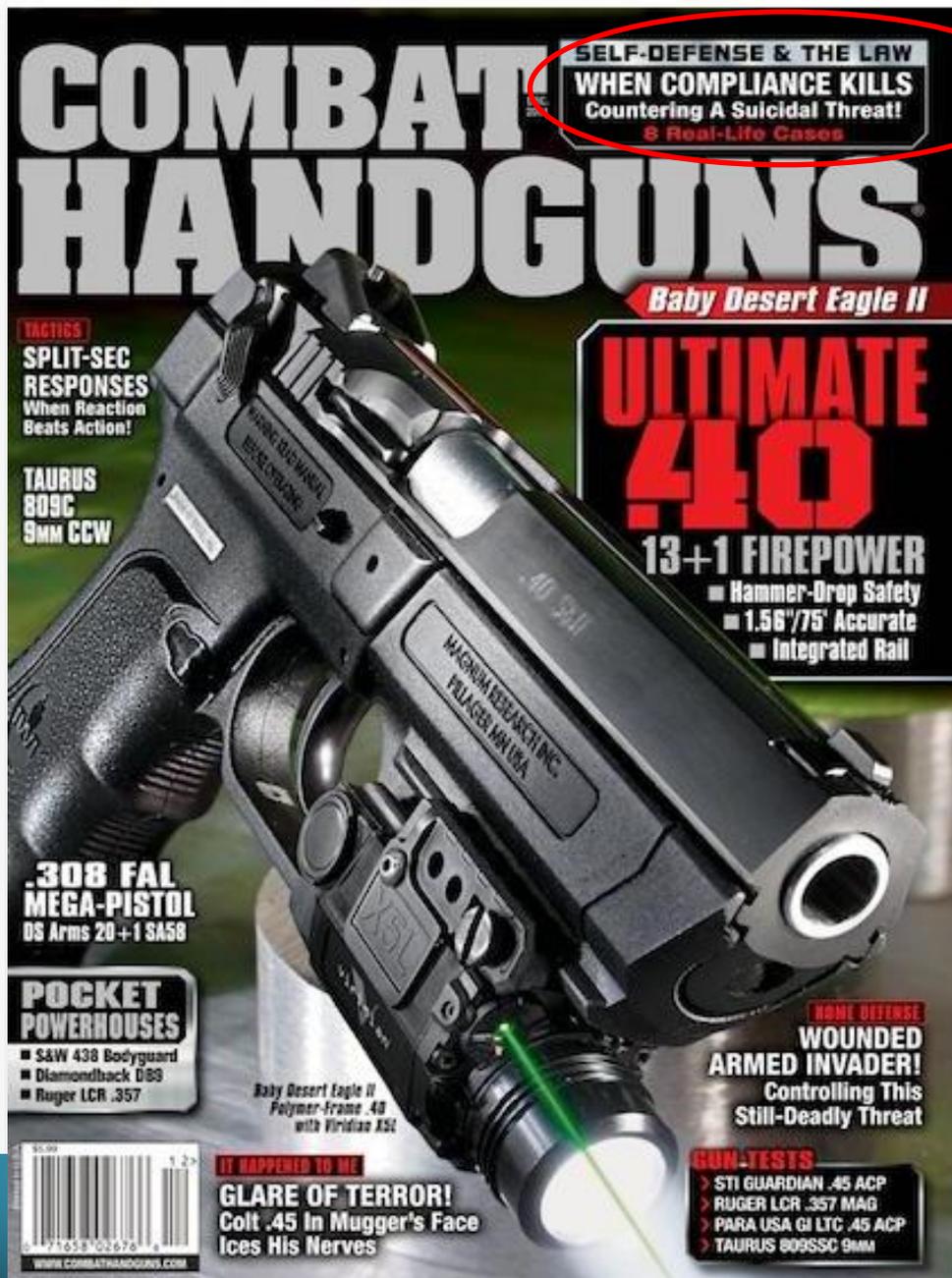
AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR
Suicide Prevention

Gun Groups Getting Involved

- Maryland Licensed Firearm Dealers Association
- Utah Shooting Sports Council
- Vermont Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs
- National Shooting Sports Foundation
- Second Amendment Foundation
- NRA
- Individual firearm instructors, retailers, sport shooters, etc.

By 2025...

- **Clinicians and gatekeepers**– mentioning firearm access is second nature and comfortable for both the clinician and the patient.
- **Gun-owning community** – every firearm safety class, website, brochure, etc., mentions suicide prevention (“Be alert to signs of suicide in loved ones and help keep firearms from those at risk until they have recovered.”)
- The more that the gun-owning community is having these conversations *outside* the clinician’s office, the easier it will be to have these conversations *inside* the office.



Column by nationally-known self-defense writer, Massad Ayoob, in December 2011 issue of *Combat Handguns* and 2015 issue of *Backwoods Home Magazine*
<http://www.backwoodshome.com/articles2/ayoo153.html>

Beyond Docs vs. Glocks

- Interested in taking on lethal means safety work?
- Don't just round up the usual advisors who dislike guns. Reach out to gun folks to advise on
 - Local offsite storage options
 - Good locking devices
 - Getting on the sportsman club's potluck dinner agenda
 - Local gun laws that your message must take into account
 - What phrases might be off-putting, etc., etc.
- Nat'l & local suicide groups, VA, Dept of Defense are finally beginning to involve gun stakeholders in shaping interventions.

Caveats

- We haven't nearly achieved message saturation necessary to change social norms— but perhaps by 2025.
- We need to put resources into studying effective messaging for gun owners and evaluating which strategies work and scrap those that don't.
- The work needs to remain non-political – let's encourage gun rights and gun control groups not to use the suicide issue as a bludgeon against one another.

Reaching Across Divides

Talking across political divides is a powerful and uplifting thing. Perhaps we'll not only save lives, but help our country move one step toward greater unity.

Means Matter



THANK YOU

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