



History and Politics of the Gun Shop Project

Forging Partnerships between Suicide
Prevention Groups and Gun Owner Groups

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Acknowledgments

- *In memoriam* – **Elaine Frank (EF)**
- **Harvard Injury Control Research Center** – David Hemenway, Matthew Miller, Deb Azrael
- **New Hampshire Firearm Safety Coalition** – esp EF, Ralph Demicco, Tom Brown, Elizabeth Fenner-Leukitis, Mary Vriniotis, Elaine de Mello, John Yule
- **Utah Suicide Prevention Coalition's Firearm Committee** – esp Kim Meyers, Clark Aposhian, Morissa Henn, Steve Eliason, Michael Staley
- **CALM America** - esp EF, Mark Ciocchi, JP Jameson, Kurt Michael
- **Funders:** Joyce Foundation, Bohnett Foundation, Fund for Safer Future, Robert Wood Johnson

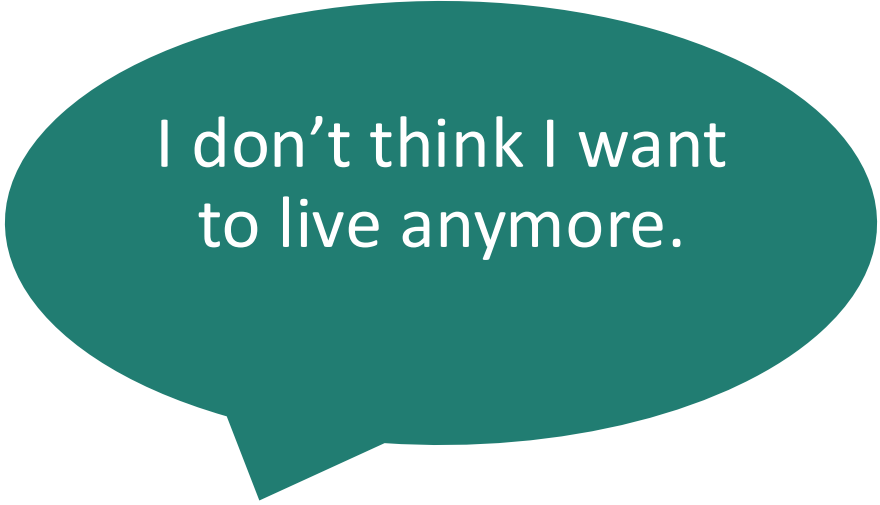
Topics

- The larger context of the Gun Shop Project
 - Lethal means safety work in the US
 - HICRC's mission to change practice in the suicide prevention field
- History & philosophy of the early Gun Shop Project and its offshoots
- Challenges to evaluation
- Missionary work vs. true collaboration

Moving the Field

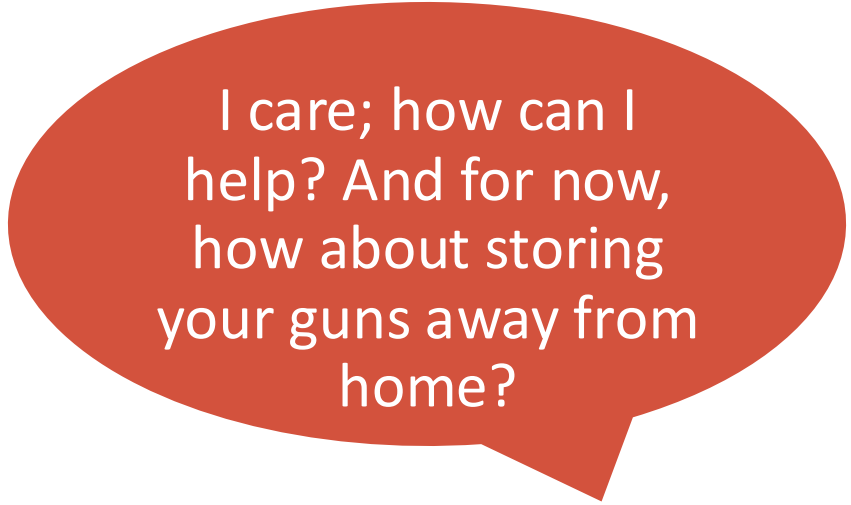
- 20 years ago, most suicide prevention groups didn't talk about guns, and most gun owner groups didn't talk about suicide.
- And yet gun owners in the US die by suicide at at least twice the rate of non-owners
- They *are not* more likely to have a mental illness or to be suicidal; they *are* more likely to die should they become suicidal.
- This is a modifiable risk factor, and yet both movements were silent.

What's the Message?



I don't think I want
to live anymore.

Distressed person



I care; how can I
help? And for now,
how about storing
your guns away from
home?

Confidante

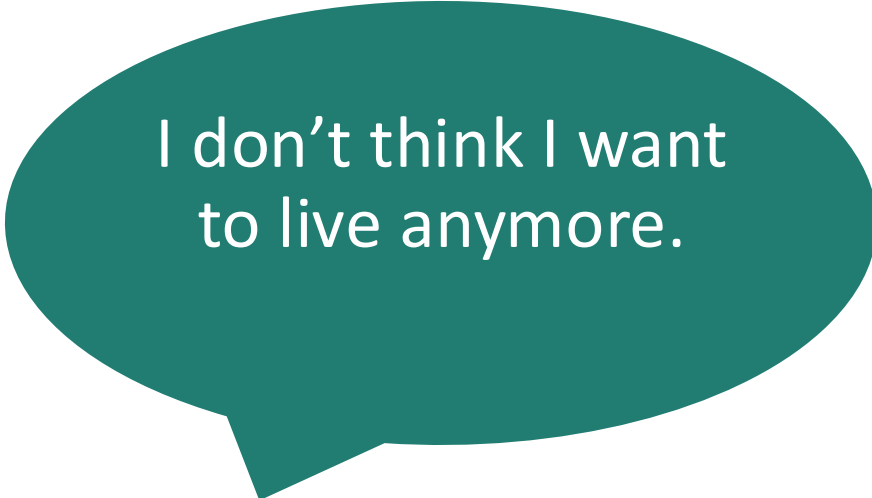
e.g., Clinician, hotline worker, police officer on a
wellness check, neighbor, shooting buddy

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 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 likely to get the message wrong.
- When approached as **part of the solution**, most gun groups will help.

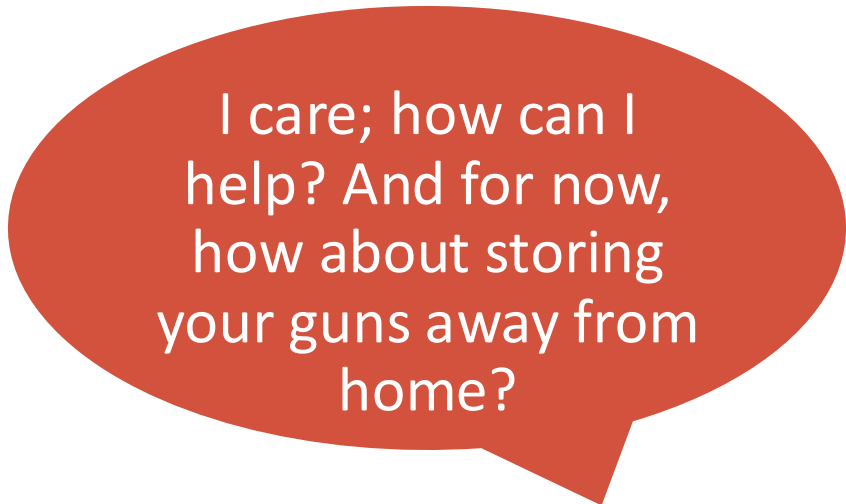
“Nothing about us without us”

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2006

How to Spread the Message with an \$80,000 Campaign?

Lay of the Land

- Each state had a coalition/agency responsible for suicide prevention plan
- SPRC was providing technical assistance to these groups
- Two national membership groups - AAS and AFSP-- provided thought leadership and advocacy.



Means Matter

Suicide, Guns & Public Health

Disseminating the Message

Clinical strategy

- Clinicians (behavioral & physical health)
- Gatekeepers (e.g., first responders, clergy, defense attorneys)

Lethal Means Counseling

Community strategy

- Firearm opinion leaders (e.g., gun shop owners, firearm instructors, sportsman clubs, firearm journalists)
- Friends/family

Suicide awareness as a basic tenet of firearm safety

Disseminating the Message

Why Not Just a Clinical Strategy?

- US psych autopsy studies indicate most suicide decedents –especially firearm decedents -- were not in treatment during the year in which they took their lives

Why Not a Gun Control Strategy?

- 92% of people who took their lives with a firearm could have passed a background check for legal ownership the day they died.

Much of saving lives, then, falls to friends, family, co-workers, and those who interact with people when they're at their lowest.

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Suicide awareness as a basic tenet of firearm safety

Community Strategy

Partnering with the Gun-Ownning Community



Good Messengers

- Firearm instructors, sportsman clubs, gun magazine writers, gun shop owners, etc. are likely good messengers.
- **Strong safety culture** around firearm safety, protecting the family, neighbors looking out for one another.
- These values dovetail well with suicide prevention.
- Expanding focus from preventing unintentional firearm deaths (~500/yr) to firearm suicides (~27,000/yr) is a natural fit.
- Many of these folks have military or first responder backgrounds and have some exposure to suicide training – and nearly all have lost someone to firearm suicide.

New Hampshire's "The Gun Shop Project"

- Coalition of gun retailers, suicide prevention people, and gun rights people began meeting together in 2009 to examine role for gun shops in preventing suicide.
- Collaboratively developed materials for gun shops in NH.



2012 NHFSC Members. Pictured: Ralph Demicco (Riley's Guns), Elaine deMello (NAMI-NH), Howard and Sarah Brown (GO-NH), Mary Vrinotis (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])

Planning Stage

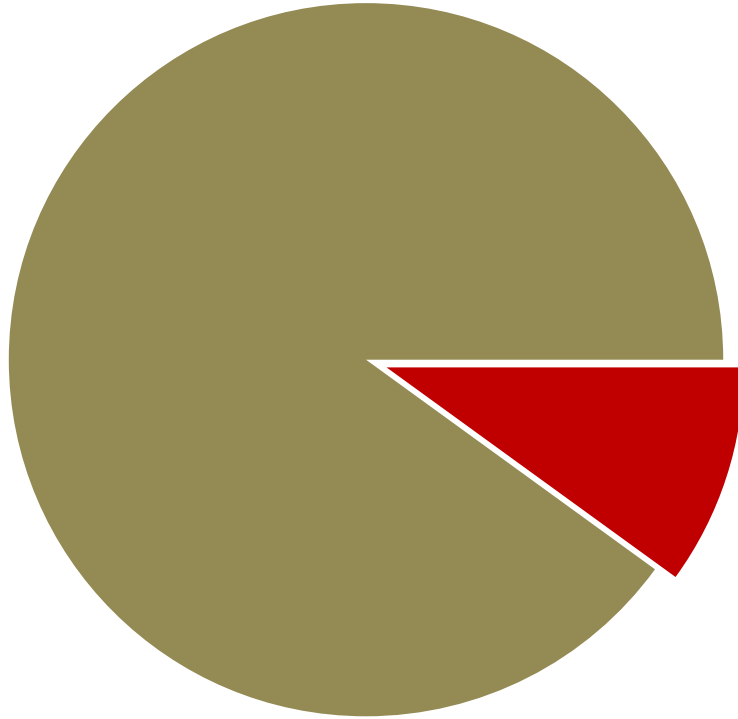
- Reviewed video of customers who took their lives and discussed known thwarted cases
- Retailers shared information on background checks, sales processes, insurance angle
- Mental health/public health folks shared information on nature of suicidal crises, local data, crisis referral systems
- Reviewed all firearm suicide reports from NH Medical Examiner's office.
- Through this process of cross-education and mutual investigation, we gained respect for one another

Mission Expansion

Started with one mission:

- **Share tips from/with retailers about steps to avoid selling a firearm to a suicidal customer** (to prevent recent-purchase suicides)

Recent-purchase Suicides



- In 2009 (start of project) 7.8% of firearm suicides in NH were recent-purchase
- “Recent purchase” = buying or renting firearm within one week of suicide (usually within hours)

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On a couple of occasions, I'd overhear a coalition member mention to another: "I went over to so-and-so's house to pick up his guns because his son is going through a really rough time." That's a public health intervention. We just need to name it and normalize it.

Friends don't let friends drive drunk.

If your friend has had too much to drink, he doesn't have to drive.
Here are three ways to keep your friend alive ...



drive your friend home



have your friend sleep over



call a cab

The Designated Driver Is The Life Of The Party

Mission Expansion

- **Share tips from/with retailers about steps to avoid selling a firearm to a suicidal customer** (to prevent recent-purchase suicides)
- **Raise awareness among customers about making their firearms inaccessible if a family member is in crisis** and disseminate the suicide helpline number (to help prevent the much larger number of suicides that involve an existing household gun).

Surveying Shops

Community Participatory Action Research

Initial Survey

- 97% do not have any written guidelines for staff regarding the sale of a firearm to someone suicidal
- 78% do not provide handouts on firearm safety
- 84% would share Tip Sheet with employees
- 81% would display suicide prevention posters and/or Lifeline cards
- Shop owners gave helpful advice on how to improve the draft materials

Pushing on an Open Door





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
for over 100 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 (4255)



www.nhfsc.org



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.

48% of NH gun shops displayed at least one of the materials (observed during unannounced visits to all shops in state).

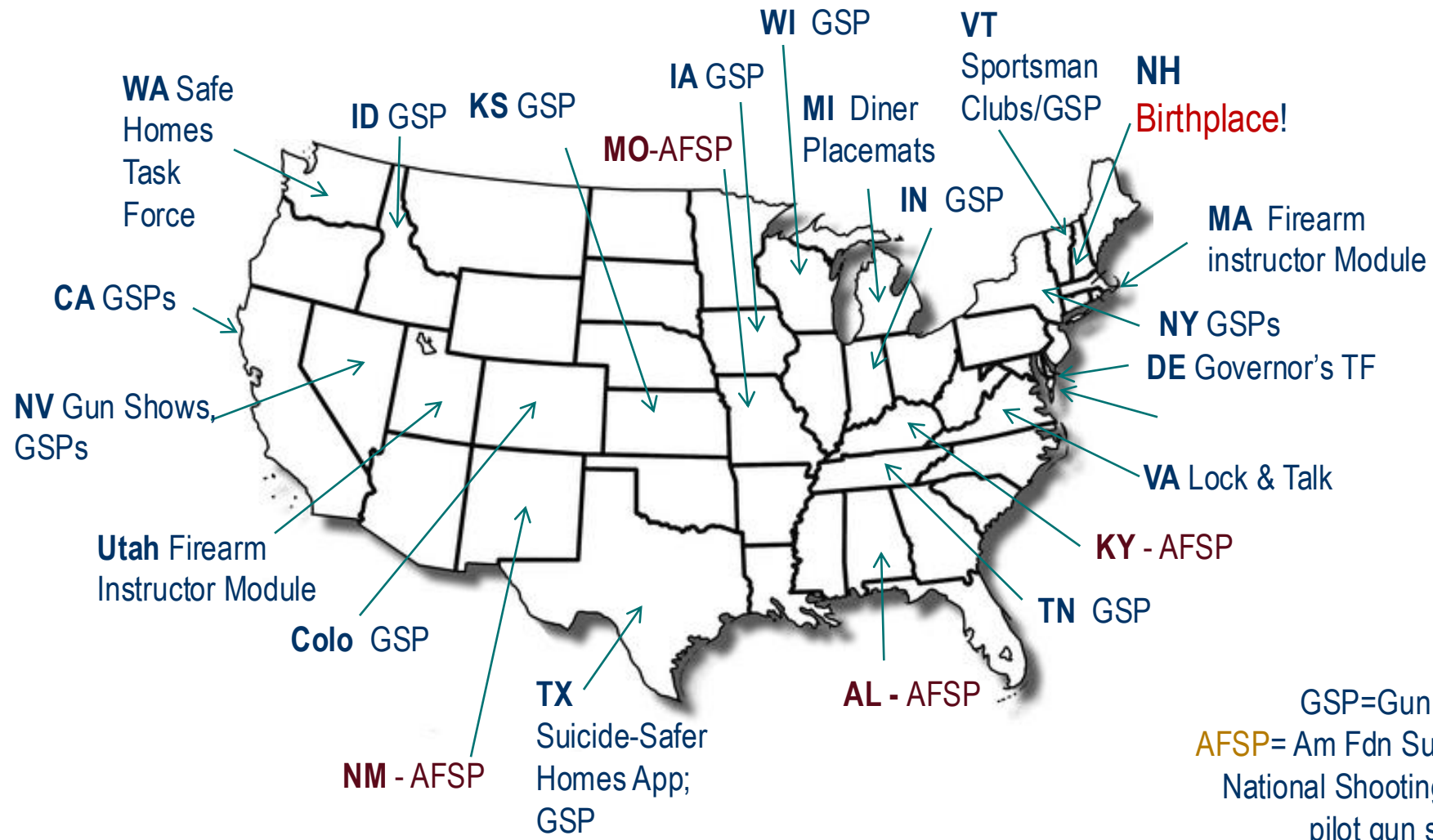
Pushing on an Open Door



Gun Partnerships - 2009



Gun Partnerships - 2016



GSP=Gun shop project
AFSP= Am Fdn Suicide Prev. &
National Shooting Sports Fdn
pilot gun shop projects

Gun Partnerships 2025 (examples)

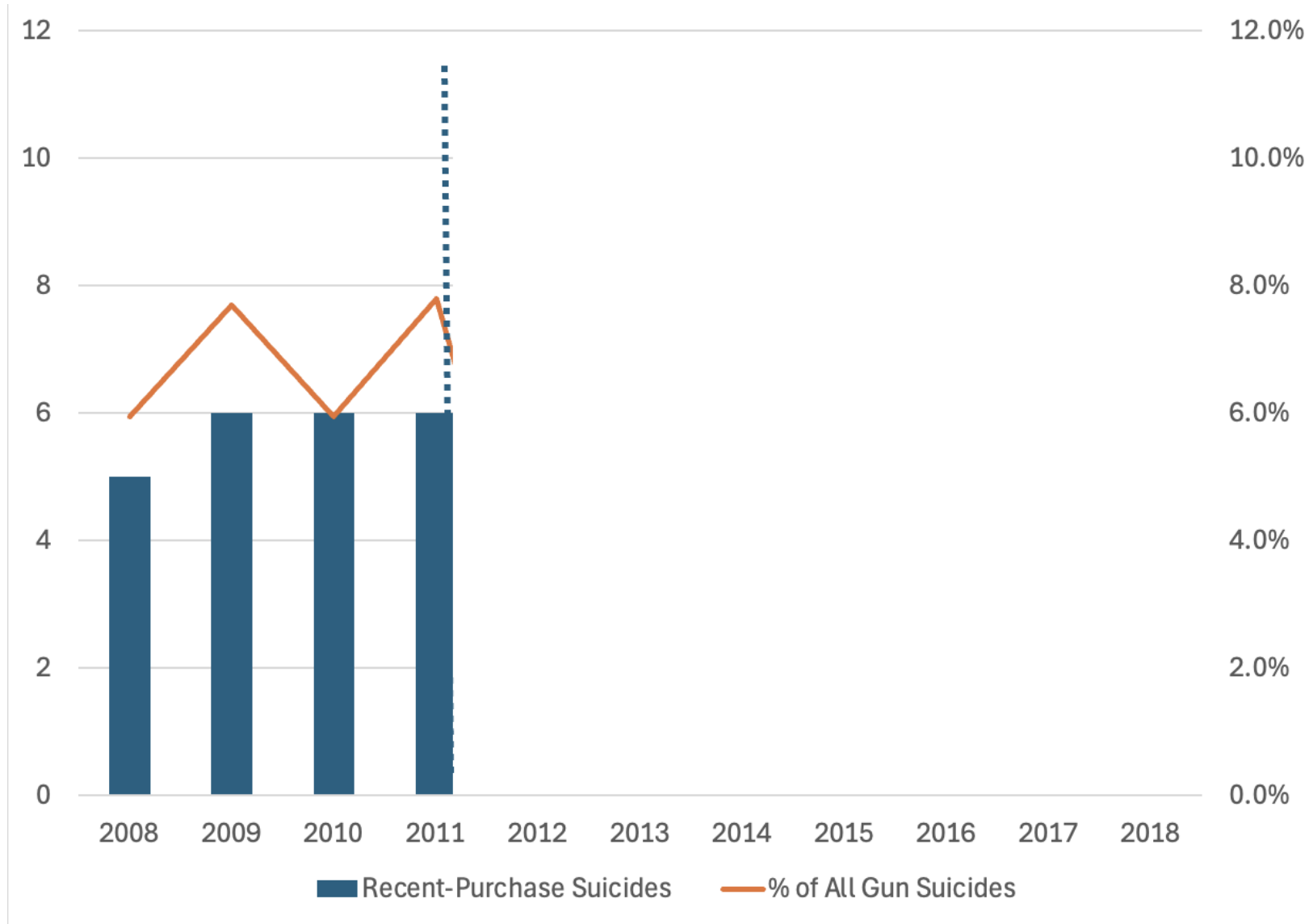
- National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) & American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – national gun shop project
- Firearm instructor initiatives: UT, WA, LA, MA, NY
- Military/veteran suicide: VA & NSSF collaboration; DOD initiatives; WorriedAboutaVeteran.org (for families of Vets); Overwatch (for Vets)
- NHFSC state coalition model spread: e.g., Lock & Talk Virginia, Safer Homes (Washington State, Missouri), Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition, Utah Suicide Prevention Coalition's Firearm Committee, etc.
- Walk the Talk America; Hold My Guns
- Firearm Storage Maps
- Tabling at gun shows
- Adding suicide prevention component to “Stop the Bleed” trainings by trauma surgeons at gun clubs
- Coverage in gun magazines, Outdoor Channel, Sportsman Channel, gun-oriented podcasts and radio shows

Gun Shop Project Letter of Agreement

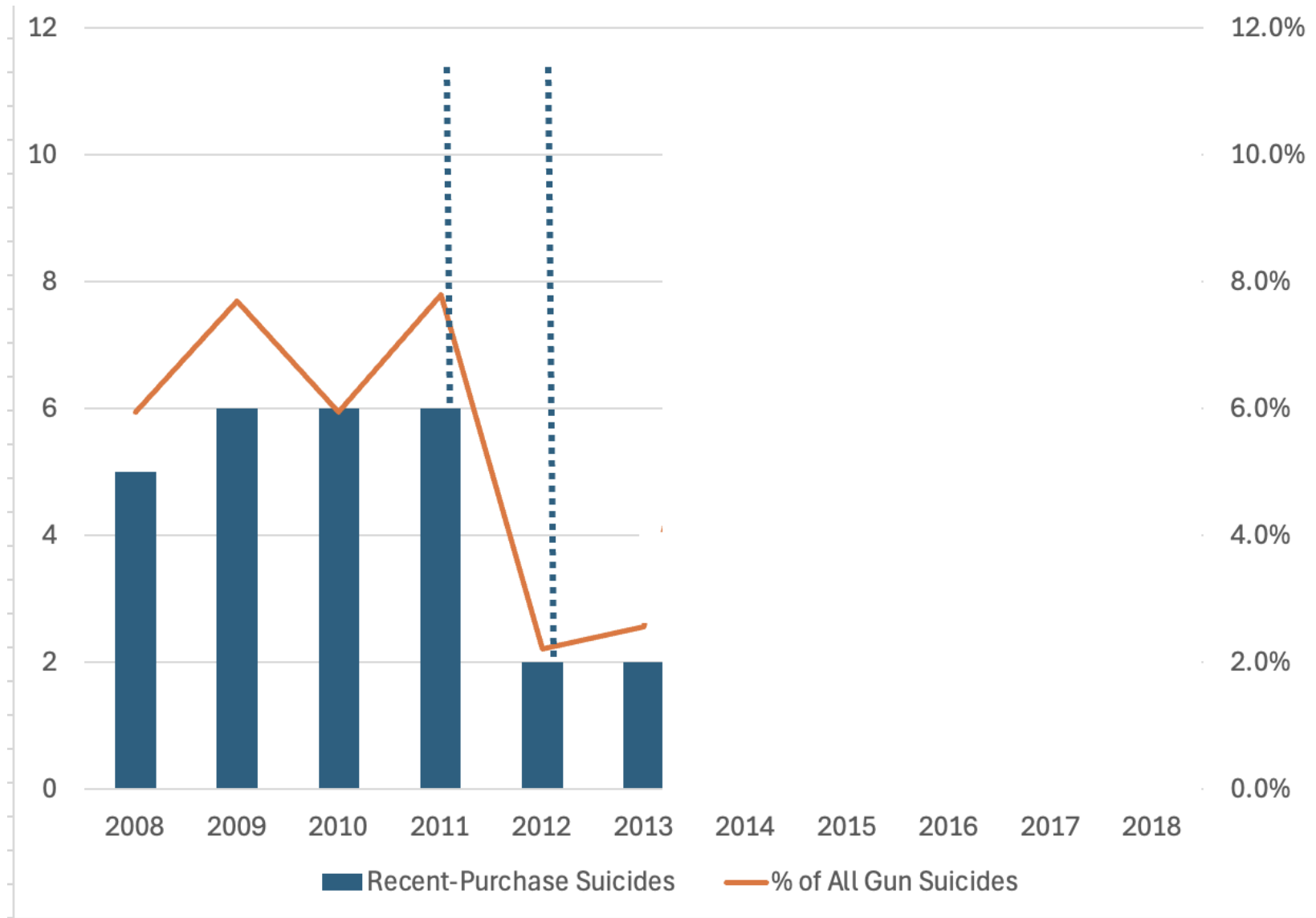
- The group includes both gun owners and people with expertise in suicide prevention research/data and clinical care.
- The group neither promotes nor discourages gun ownership; individuals can take whatever positions they want but as a group, the group avoids taking legislative positions.

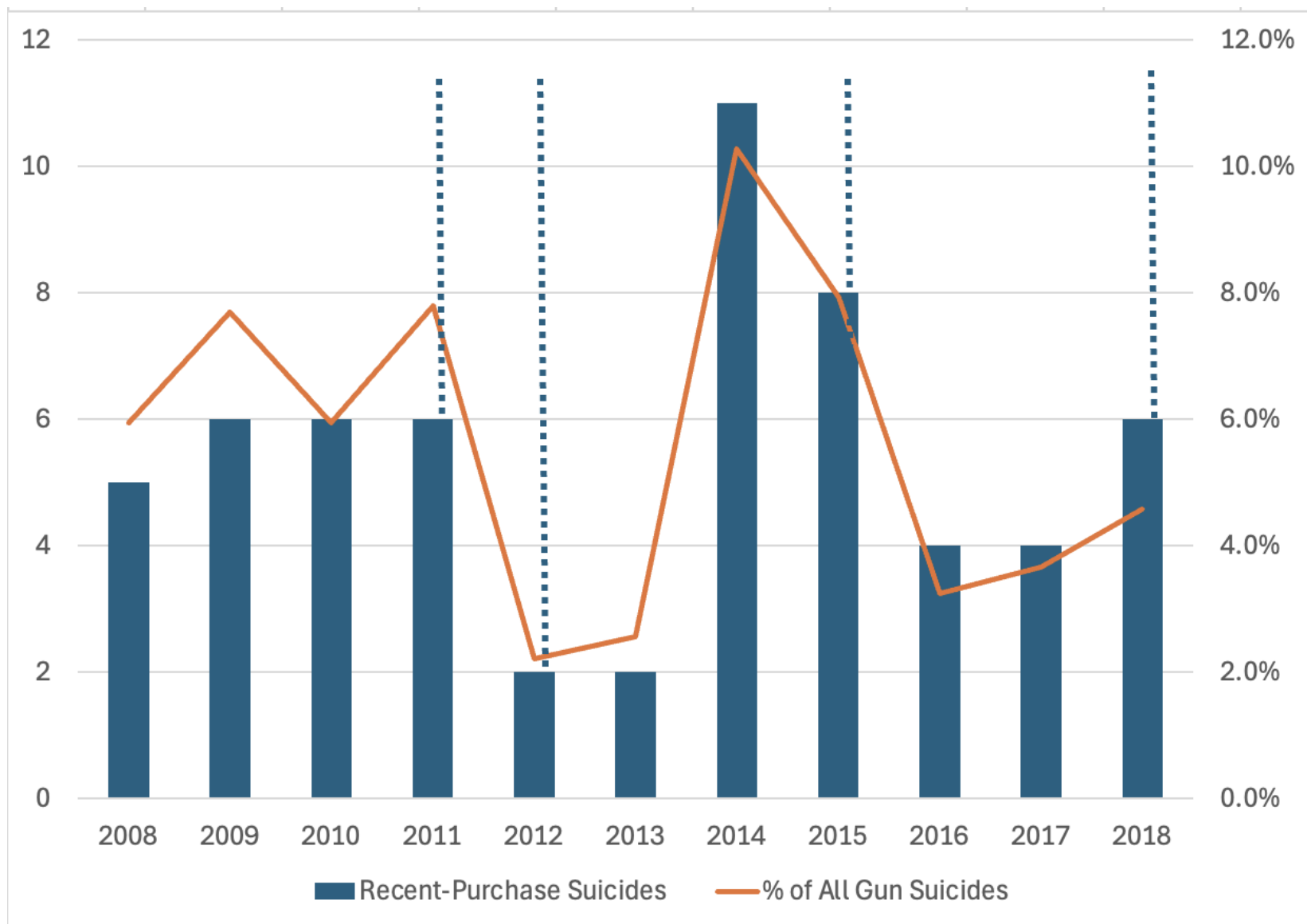
Evaluation

- • Share tips to prevent recent-purchase suicides
- Raise awareness about making household firearms inaccessible if a family member is suicidal or in crisis.



Source: NH Medical Examiner Death Investigation Reports (total of 80-130 firearm suicides per yr)





Evaluation

- Share tips to prevent recent-purchase suicides
- • Raise awareness about making household firearms inaccessible if a family member is suicidal or in crisis.

Message Saturation - Posters and pamphlets in a busy gun shop are an incredibly weak intervention. We had nothing even approaching the sort of message saturation one would need to expect to see an actual change in behavior that would result in fewer suicides.

HUGE Caveats

- We need properly powered studies with an intervention that achieves sufficient message saturation.
- People doing applied research in this area--Emmy Betz, Joe Simonneti, Gala True, Craig Bryan, Mike Annestis, Meagan Ranney, Marianne Goodman, Neil Uspal, Mental Health Research Network (MHRN), Zero Suicide researchers, and many more--have their work cut out for them

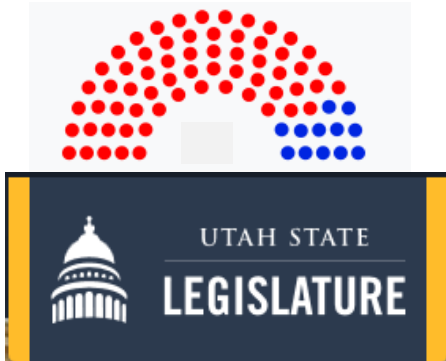
Advantages of Collaboration

- Message/attitude testing – finding the open doors, identifying areas of resistance and understanding if they can be turned into open doors

IS YOUR
SAFETY ON?

Utah Case Example

Utah Responds



- Rep. Eliason (R) in 2014 led legislation to develop suicide prev. messaging geared to gun owners.
- State SAMH agency (Kim Myers) sets up
↓
diverse firearm committee of UT Suicide Prevention Coalition to advise on materials.



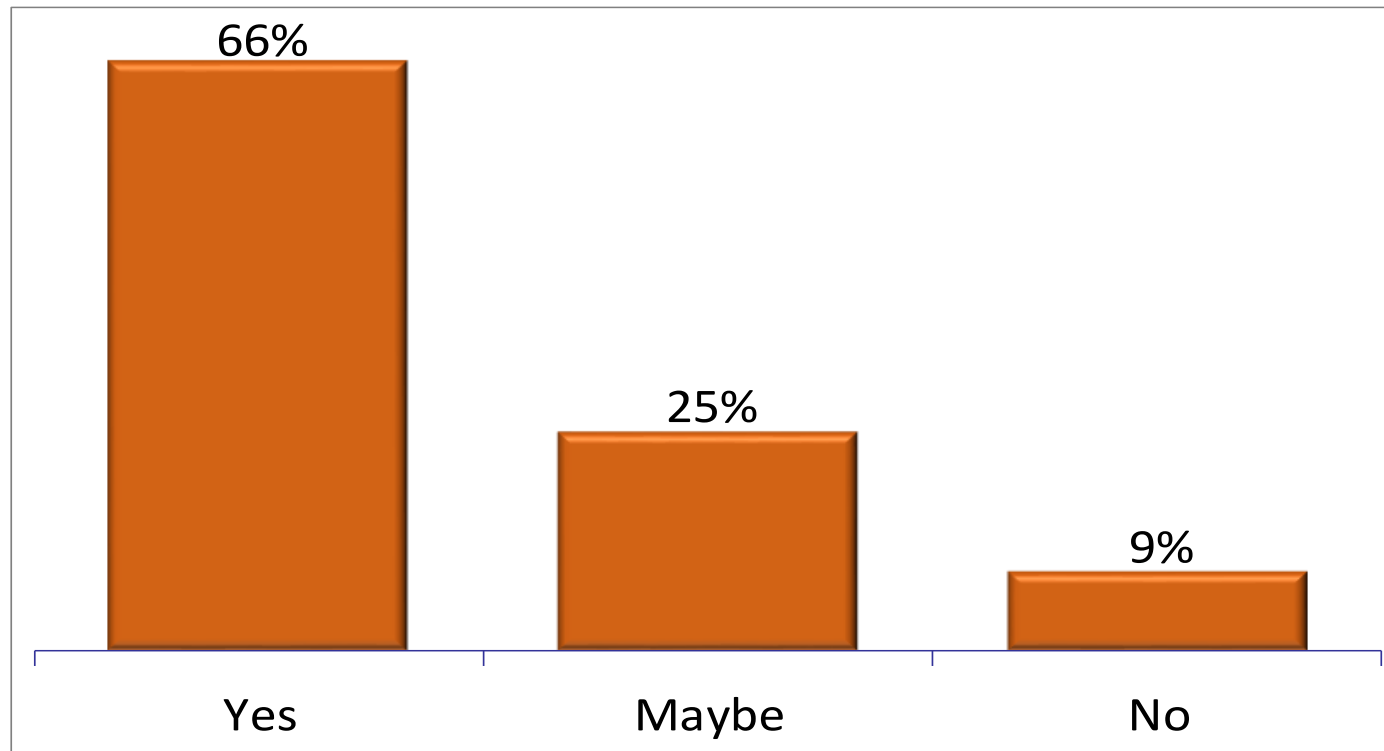
Utah
**Suicide Prevention
Coalition**

MeansMatter



Instructor Survey (n=998)

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

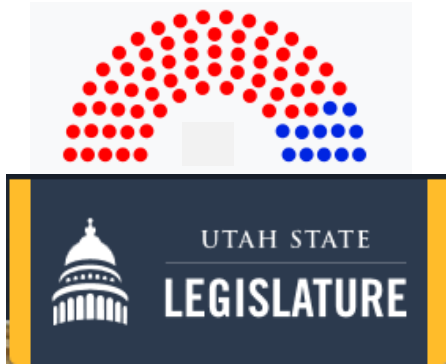


Bit of resistance

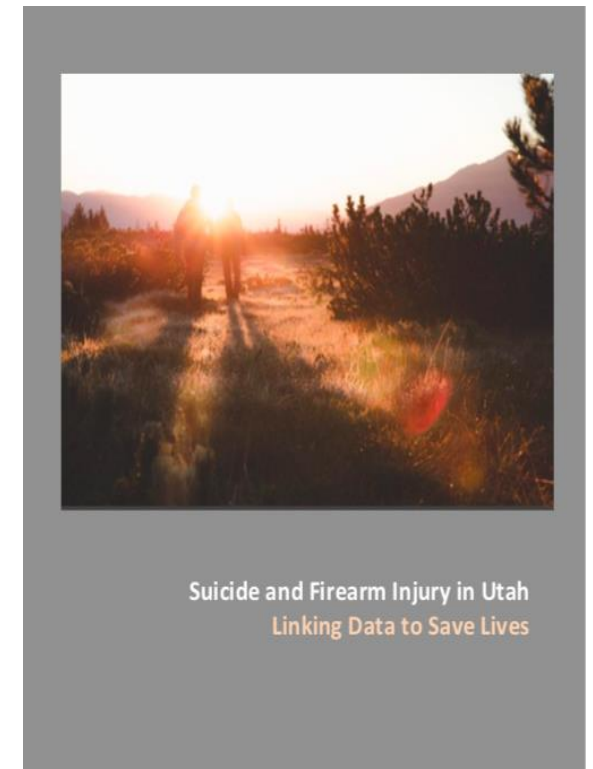
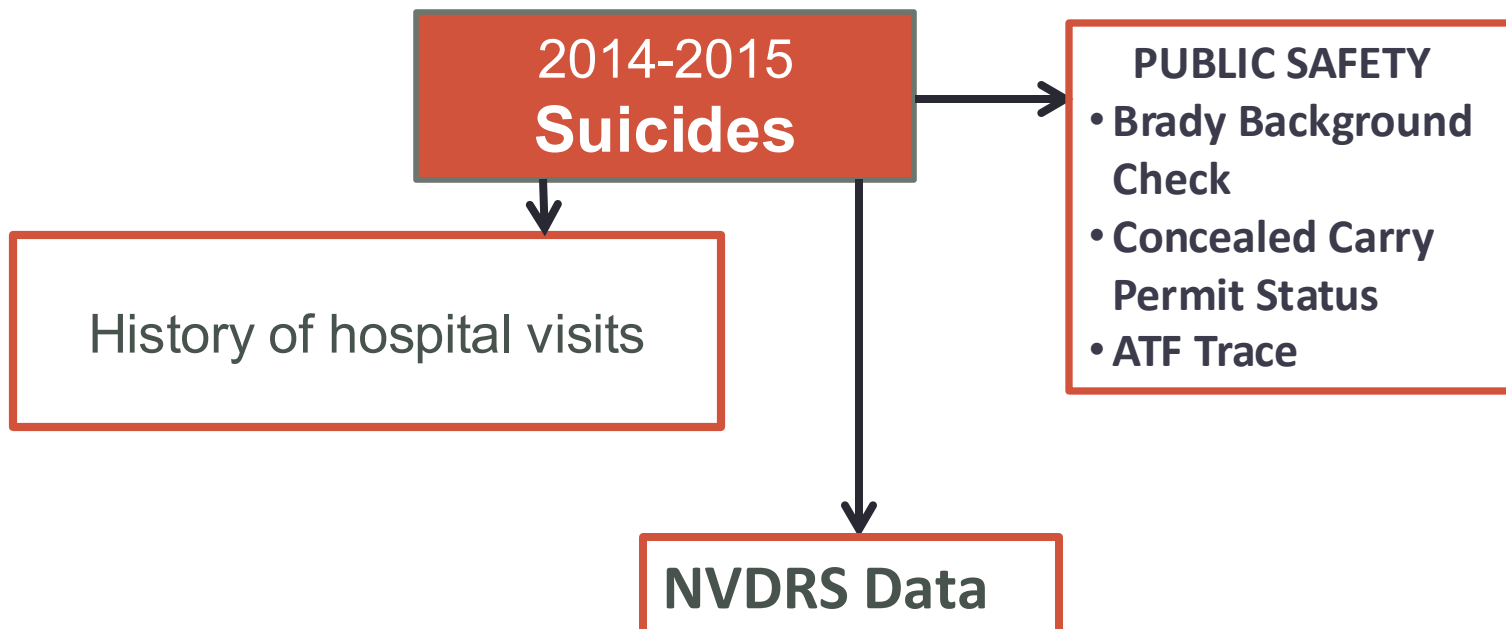
“People who take CFP classes aren’t the sort who would become suicidal.”

Survey of instructors certified to teach Utah Concealed Firearm Permit classes. Acknowledgments: Rep. Steve Eleason, Kim Myers, Clark Aposhian, BCI, and the Utah Suicide Prevention Coalition’s firearm safety committee

Utah Data Linkage Study



- Legislature directed state SAMH agency to conduct a study of firearms & suicide in Utah, linking existing state data. Gun rights group testified in support.



How many men who took their lives with a gun had a concealed firearm permit (CFP)?

1 out of 4



State action: Suicide prevention & lethal means safety info now part of CFP application process, classes, & renewals.

Does exposure to module change attitudes & behavior?



Survey of UT Firearm Instructors

2016 (Before module launched) n=999

2019 (After) n=498

Does exposure to module change attitudes & behavior?

	2016	2019
Support teaching suicide prev.	66%	81%
Very likely to hold onto suicidal friend's gun (vs. likely, not likely, very unlikely, unk)	48%	62%
Would suicidal friend be safer without their guns?	44%	51%

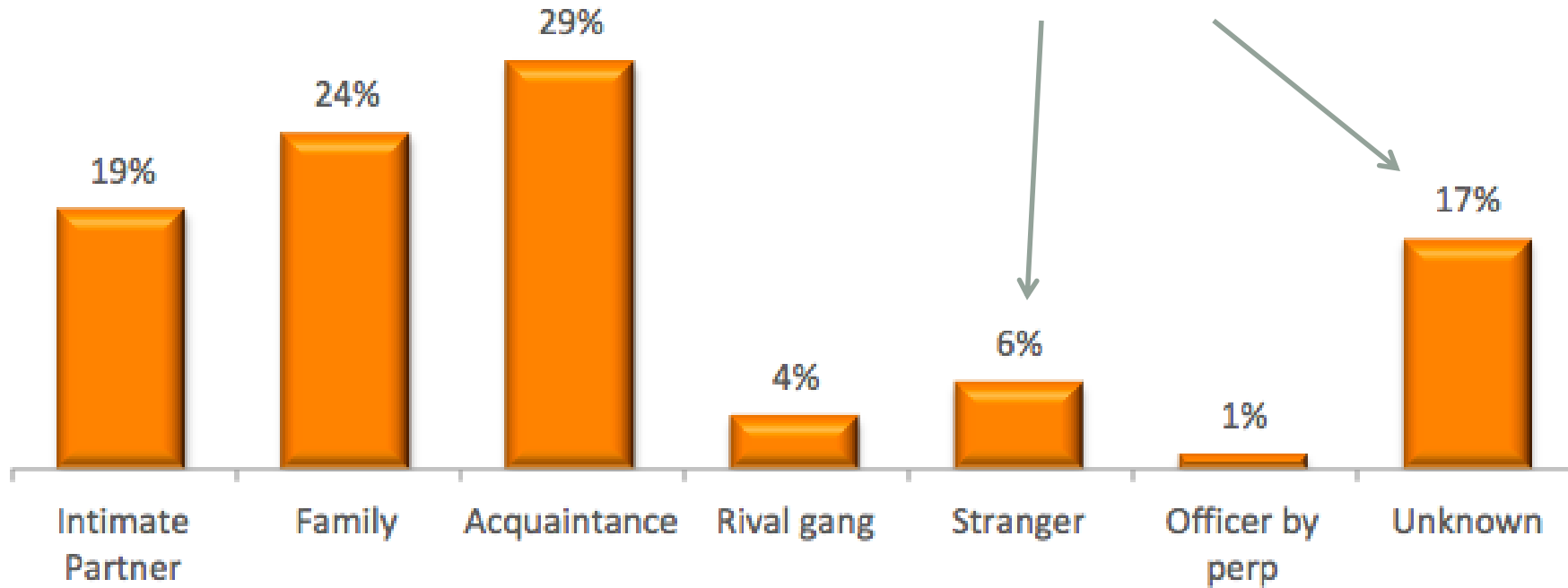
	2019 Hasn't taught SP	2019 Has taught SP
Would suicidal friend be safer without their guns?	42%	62%
Ever held onto someone's gun to protect them in past 2 yrs.	16%	24%

Advantages of Collaboration

- Message/attitude testing – finding the open doors, smoothing the areas of resistance
 - “CFP students aren’t the type to become suicidal”
 - Handling the self-defense/home-defense guns
 - Concerns over attacks by strangers– low crime area

72% of victims were killed
by those they knew, but...

...who are these guys?



Relationship of homicide victim to suspect—Utah 2011-2015
n=289 victims

Weighing Risks

Over 5 years in Utah:

- 11 “bad guy” stranger homicides (or maybe double that)
- 1,539 firearm suicides

Utahns can use local data to weigh risks and inform personal decisions about gun storage.

Does it make sense to keep guns unlocked and at the ready to guard against a very low-probability event when doing so

- Escalates suicide risk
- Makes guns vulnerable to theft → enters illicit gun market

Advantages of Collaboration

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 - Concerns over attacks by strangers– low crime area
 - Concerns over attacks by strangers– high crime area
 - David Hureau and Hilary Jackl working with Perry DeReef and Troy Harden of Chicago’s Metropolitan Peace Academy (CVI training group) to learn from young gun owners/gun handlers in neighborhoods with very high homicide rates on how to message lethal means safety work for suicide prevention

Advantages of Collaboration

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- Opportunity for back-channel communication on sensitive issues

Advantages of Collaboration

NSSF® *The Firearm Industry
Trade Association*

For immediate release | October 10, 2024

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[Bill Brassard](#)

203-426-1320 ext. 212

**NSSF Adds Resources for Veterans, Including a Fact Sheet on
the Mistaken Beliefs about VA Confiscating Veterans' Guns**



Who Brings What to the Suicide Prevention Table

<i>Benefits for Suicide Prevention</i>	MH/ Suic Prev Groups	Gun Groups	GVP Groups
Passion, desire to do good	×	×	×
Political know-how	×	×	×
Knowledge of clinical landscape	×		
Knowledge of suicide research & data	×		
Technical firearm know-how		×	
In-roads into gun community		×	
Insight into what is welcoming & estranging language for gun owners		×	

“I Know Best” vs. Collaboration

Missionary/Scolding/Coercive/“I Know Best”	Collaboration
“Responsible gun clubs should promote suicide prevention”	“Are you interested in getting involved in suicide prevention work? You’ve got a lot of expertise our group could benefit from.”
“Here are materials for you to use.”	“Here are examples of materials other states have used. Could you help customize to our state?”
“We’re offering a suicide prevention training to retailers.”	“Is there specific type of training on suicide prevention you’d find useful? Are there a couple of retailers with expertise in this area who could advise on topics?”
“We are introducing a bill to require firearm instructors to cover suicide prevention.”	“We’ve secured funding to work with firearm instructors on developing a module they can use in their classes.”

Historic Record

- Lemle, R. B. (2024). Bridging the sociopolitical divide: Transforming efforts to prevent firearm suicide. *American Psychologist*.
- Barber, Frank, Demicco (2017). Reducing Suicides through Partnerships between Health Professionals and Gun Owner Groups: Beyond Docs vs. Glocks. *JAMA Internal Medicine*.
- Vriniotis, Barber, Frank et al (2015) A suicide prevention campaign for firearm dealers in New Hampshire. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*.
- Barber, Berrigan, Henn et al (2019). Linking Public Safety And Public Health Data For Firearm Suicide Prevention In Utah. *Health Affairs*.

THANK YOU

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CalmAmerica.org (training for gun shop personnel; TA for state firearm instructor modules)

WorriedAboutaVeteran.org (info for friends/family; summaries of 50 states' laws that have a bearing on how and with whom you can temporarily loan your guns)

NHFSC.org (to download Gun Shop Project materials)

Means Matter (section where you can update what gun ownership partnerships your state is doing)