



# Suicide Prevention is Everyone's Business: A Toolkit for Safe Firearm Storage in Your Community



**VA**



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs



**American  
Foundation  
for Suicide  
Prevention**



## Safe Firearm Storage for Suicide Prevention

### Understanding Suicide Prevention and Safe Firearm Storage

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is on a mission to end suicide among those who have served, or are currently serving, in the armed forces. Suicide is complicated and tragic, but it's also preventable — and safe firearm storage is an important part of suicide prevention.

There is no single cause of suicide: It is the outcome of multiple contributing factors and events. However, environmental factors such as access to lethal means increase the risk for suicide. While there are a number of commonly used lethal means, firearms were used in nearly half of all suicides among Americans in 2016, and nearly 70 percent of all Veteran suicide deaths.

While service members and Veterans are well-versed in the handling and secure storage of firearms, other members of their households may not be. In periods of crisis or heightened emotions, unsafe firearm storage can increase risk. By learning and practicing safe storage practices before challenging times arise, you can reduce the risk for suicide or injury for everyone in your home.

Even though there are many ways to practice safe storage, too many Americans do not regularly secure firearms in their homes. Together, we can change that fact by spreading the word about the significance of safe storage and encouraging service members, Veterans, and their families to secure any firearm in their home.

No single organization can tackle this issue alone. That's why we developed this toolkit, to empower local leaders to take action. Our hope is that these resources help you forge strong coalitions with people committed to making safe firearm storage the norm in your community.



## Effective Methods for Safe Firearm Storage

Together VA, the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) have compiled tips for safely storing firearms as well as best practices for sharing these guidelines in your community. Responsible firearm ownership begins by understanding safe storage and the steps for properly securing firearms in your home.

**What is safe firearm storage?** Firearm safety is not only about the handling of a firearm, but that responsibility also extends to secure storage. Safe storage consists of keeping firearms locked and unloaded, and separating firearms and ammunition when not in use. It also involves making sure household members understand the safety guidelines concerning firearms.

**What are options for safe storage?** There are a number of different ways to safely secure firearms, with some options shown in the image below. Learn more and find the option that works best for you and your family at [www.nssf.org/safety](http://www.nssf.org/safety).

### A RANGE OF OPTIONS

	<b>CABLE LOCK</b> Price Range: \$10–\$50 <p>A cable lock can be used on most firearms, allows for quick access in an emergency and offers security from theft. The cable runs through the barrel or action of a firearm to prevent it from being accidentally fired, requiring either a key or combination to unlock it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>AFFORDABLE</li><li>ACCESSIBLE</li><li>THEFT DETERRENT</li></ul>
	<b>GUN CASE</b> Price Range: \$10–\$150 <p>For those looking to conceal, protect or legally transport a registered firearm, a gun case is an affordable solution available in a variety of materials including plastic, fabric or metal. Be sure to lock it with an external device for added security.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>AFFORDABLE</li><li>PORTABLE</li><li>PROTECTS FROM DAMAGE</li></ul>
	<b>LOCK BOX</b> Price Range: \$25–\$350 <p>With integrated locks, storage boxes provide reliable protection for firearms, and allow gun owners to legally transport them outside of their home.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>PORTABLE</li><li>ACCESSIBLE</li><li>PROTECTS FROM DAMAGE</li></ul>
	<b>ELECTRONIC LOCK BOX</b> Price Range: \$50–\$350 <p>Electronic lock boxes are an effective way to store or legally transport firearms, and they also prevent theft since only the person with the code can access the contents. Some electronic lock boxes are specially designed for quick access to stored firearms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>PORTABLE</li><li>THEFT DETERRENT</li><li>PROTECTS FROM DAMAGE</li></ul>
	<b>FULL SIZE AND BIOMETRIC GUN SAFES</b> Price Range: \$200–\$2,500 <p>A gun safe protects its contents from the elements and allows owners to safely store multiple firearms in one place. Gun safes of all sizes are now available with biometric options to ensure only certain people have access.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>THEFT DETERRENT</li><li>PROTECTS FROM DAMAGE</li></ul>

**When should owners consider out-of-home storage?** Owners may consider increasing firearm security when someone in the home is at risk for suicide or self-harm. Take extra precaution around people who have risk factors or are demonstrating warning signs, including:

- Changes in usual patterns of behavior
- A history of treatment for mental illness
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Self-isolation
- Violent or reckless behavior
- A recent major life event, such as divorce, job loss, or financial trouble
- Expression of suicidal thoughts, feelings, or behavior
- Expression of feelings of hopelessness, or of being a burden to others

### Addressing Barriers to Safe Storage of Firearms

Although nearly half of all Veterans possess a firearm, only 1 in 3 follow the firearm industry's recommendations for safely storing firearms in the home. Some common barriers to practicing safe storage include the following:

- **Concerns about access.** Some firearm owners believe they cannot quickly access a secured firearm. However, safe storage options such as lockable cases can be quickly opened while also reducing access to unauthorized people.
- **Out of sight ≠ out of mind.** Hiding a loaded firearm in a closet, drawer, or similar location is **NOT** enough to safely secure your firearm, and household members often know the owner's hiding places. Research shows that risk is significantly reduced when firearms are stored separately from ammunition.
- **Thinking that someone in crisis will find other means for self-harm.** It is a **myth** that if somebody really wants to die by suicide, there is nothing that you can do about it. The **reality** is that the acute risk for suicide is often time-limited, and when a current method for suicide is not available, most people do not switch to a different method. If you can help a person survive the immediate crisis and suicidal intent by keeping a firearm safely stored, then you will go a long way toward saving a life. Research shows that the majority of people who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide.



Research shows that many Veterans agree that securing household firearms is effective and important to reduce risk for injury.

## Engaging Your Community

VA recognizes the crucial role that communities and individuals play in reducing suicide risk by promoting safe firearm storage. The best way to achieve meaningful change is to involve your entire community. Working with a group of committed people will amplify and extend your efforts to encourage safe firearm storage and help prevent suicide in your community.

VA, NSSF, and AFSP developed this step-by-step guide for fostering community collaboration to promote safe firearm storage, increase awareness that suicide is preventable, and encourage action by providing helpful resources. The toolkit includes guidance for:

- **Step 1: Preparation.** Developing a community coalition
- **Step 2: Mobilization.** Creating and implementing a community action plan
- **Step 3: Messaging.** Spreading the word
- **Step 4: Feedback.** Monitoring and evaluating your impact

Each section provides advice for engaging your community and suggests tools for implementing an action plan to promote safe firearm storage. The toolkit will help to achieve the following goals with emphasis on service members, Veterans, and their families:

- Promote the safe storage of household firearms as normative and acceptable.
- Increase awareness that suicide is preventable and endorse the role of safe storage to reduce firearm injury.
- Encourage precautionary by providing resources and support to engage in safe firearm storage practices to prevent suicide.

**Remember:** A one-size-fits-all approach is not effective. Programs to promote safe firearm storage among service members and Veterans are most effective when they are carried out by and with the community, instead of coming from outside the community without their support. Your program should reflect the realities of your community and suit your unique situation.



## Developing a Community Coalition

This section can help you bring together a group of community members who are interested in working in concert toward a common goal to prevent suicide. Recruiting the right people and organizations to join your coalition is critical to success: The goal is to gather together people with different skills and ideas who share a concern about Veteran suicide and an interest in encouraging safe firearm storage. This group will drive your strategy and help to make sure that the activities are manageable for all parties.

### Identify Potential Coalition Members

Start by finding individuals and organizations that already work on issues of suicide prevention, the well-being of service members and Veterans, or safe firearm storage, and then look more broadly for others who should be involved. Consider not only those who have influence and will be supportive, but also those who may put obstacles in the coalition's path. Your group may include the following:

- Community leaders
- Health or mental health workers
- Local AFSP chapters
- Local media
- Regional suicide prevention teams or coordinators
- Military and Veterans Service Organizations
- Local and state law enforcement and emergency response agencies
- Shooting ranges, firearm dealers, and shooting clubs
- Faith-based organizations
- Local colleges and universities
- Individuals with lived experience
- Civic and volunteer organizations

Don't limit yourself to this list. The most important consideration is to find people who are passionate about creating change.

### Enlist Coalition Partners

After you've identified potential members, it's time to invite them to participate in the coalition. For each prospect, consider whether the invitation should be a formal letter or more casual email or phone call — but the content of your invitation should remain the same. Explain the purpose of the coalition, its potential benefits to the community, and why the prospect was selected to participate, and extend an invitation to a kickoff meeting. For a sample letter template, see Appendix B.

You may need to follow up by phone with prospects who do not respond. Be prepared to briefly walk them through the information you sent in the invitation and answer their questions about the coalition.

## Plan and Organize a Kickoff Meeting

Your first meeting should confirm coalition participation or membership and agree on the coalition's goals and next steps. The meeting should be held in a public space in the community, with an agenda that covers the following items:

- Introductions of the participants
- Background information about the reason for the meeting
- Discussion about what is already being done in the community to encourage safe firearm storage and help prevent suicide, and how the coalition can support these efforts and develop new initiatives
- Input from potential members on the purpose of the coalition and recommendations of others they think should be involved
- Identification of the coalition's goals and loose definition of expectations for involvement
- Determination of who is interested in continued participation in the coalition and immediate next steps

**Meeting logistics.** To increase member participation: Choose convenient meeting locations and times of day, at a comfortable site. Try to hold meetings in neutral territory, such as the local library. Aim to meet only once a month, avoiding conflicts with scheduled events or holidays. Finally, keep meetings to just one or two hours, following an agenda with clear objectives.

## Structure Your Community Coalition

There are no set rules for a coalition's structure, but considering several elements can help the group move forward with your community action plan:

- **Finite duration.** The coalition's goals should dictate its longevity. Although an open-ended time frame may seem attractive, a defined timeline can lead to a more engaged and productive group.
- **Common framework.** An agreed-upon framework, common vocabulary, and set of principles for preventing injury will ensure that members share the same overview of the problem and underlying philosophy of the coalition.
- **Defined membership expectations.** Successful coalitions generally have active planning groups or subcommittees that carry out coalition activities. Participation between meetings is likely and should be expressed as an expectation, while considering participants' time and resource limitations.
- **Decision-making process.** Decisions can be made by consensus; however, some members may find lengthy decision-making discussions tedious or distracting, which may decrease their attendance. Having a defined process from the outset will help avoid problems later.

- **Early response to coalition challenges.** One clear indication that a coalition is having difficulties is a decline in coalition membership. The most common difficulties include:
  - Poor group dynamics, including unnecessarily draining decision-making and tension over leadership or decisions
  - Membership concerns such as a difficult agency or member, shifts in staff assignments, changes in available resources, or member burnout
  - Emphasis on too many long-term goals without short-term objectives to generate quick wins that energize the group
  - Ineffectiveness in carrying out coalition activities due to inadequate planning or resources
  - Changes affecting the coalition's mission, such as new legislation that alters the unique reality or situation that the coalition agreed to address
- **Celebrate of success stories.** Maintaining morale and a sense that the coalition is playing a vital role in addressing the problem are essential to ongoing success. Take time to acknowledge your big wins and small victories when they happen.

**Success story.** In partnership with NSSF, community members in Memphis held a daylong event to promote safe firearm storage, providing more than 2,500 firearm safety toolkits to local residents.

## Creating a Community Outreach Plan

After building your coalition, the next step for advancing your collective goals is preparing an outreach plan tailored to your community's unique needs and preferences. Coalition members who committed to working on this effort during the kickoff meeting should meet to develop an overarching strategy and timeline for specific activities (see Appendix D).

Consider the following when reconvening the group:

- The motivations and skills of the participants and how they can contribute to the outreach plan
- The resources, such as expertise, time, and money, that are needed and available to develop and execute your plan
- The local context, such as the community's culture and preferred ways of sharing and receiving information

The written outreach plan should include all the details needed for execution, including clearly defined objectives, target audiences, messaging and calls to action for various audiences, activities for disseminating messages and information, and methods for evaluating the plan's results.

### Define Strategic Objectives

Before anything else, it's critical to define what you want to get out of your outreach efforts. What are your objectives for encouraging changes in attitudes or behavior in the community? Think through specific outcomes and consider how they reflect and align with the goals identified by the coalition.

It is important to make your objectives clear and measurable so that you can examine whether and how your strategy worked and ways to improve it. You may identify several objectives that may be achieved fairly quickly — such as creating a flyer — and others that may require long-term implementation of your outreach plan — such as obtaining commitments from community partners to distribute that flyer.

Consider developing a timeline for each objective that defines when you can reasonably expect to achieve them and tasks to be completed along the way. Setting clear and realistic benchmarks will give the group direction and a way to measure success.

**Motivating factors.** Behavior change starts with increased knowledge around safe storage to strengthen beliefs of the significance and feasibility of securing firearms.

## Identify Your Target Audiences

Once you define your objectives, you can then identify the groups of people you need to reach and influence to achieve those objectives. While service members and Veterans are your primary audiences, it's important to also reach their immediate supporters — family members and friends — as well as indirect influencers in the community who can help promote meaningful behavior change. By involving the people who interact with service members and Veterans every day, you can deliver messages through the people they know and trust in the community.

## Select Your Messages

After you've determined who you want to reach and what you want them to do, determine what you need to tell them. These messages should convey your goals and objectives in ways that resonate with your target audiences' interests and needs, motivating them to respond. They should be defined in the early stages of planning to make sure messaging is consistent and accurate across all coalition activities.

Consider the following when choosing messages:

- Encourage safe firearm storage behaviors.
- Support the main points you want your audience to hear, understand, and remember.
- Tailor messages to each target audience. What are their unique characteristics or capabilities? What do you want them to know and do? What do they need and want to hear from you? What do they already know?
- Conform to the format: The message context and length will vary depending on whether it's used in a public service announcement; print materials such as flyers, posters, brochures, or fact sheets; content and graphics for Facebook, Twitter, or other social media; or talking points to encourage engagement and guide conversations.

VA, NSSF, and AFSP have compiled a wide range of messages and supporting materials that are available for your use free of charge. Some of them can even be customized with local contact information. For a list of tools, information, and messaging available for your coalition to use, see Appendix A.

**Messaging tip.** Always make behavior change messages actionable — provide details on how to store firearms safely, and offer incentives (such as gun locks) to encourage people to secure firearms.

## Follow Tips for Effective Messaging

While the right message can go a long way in changing attitudes and behavior, the wrong messages can have a negative impact — and could even increase risk for some people. Avoid quoting statistics that make suicide sound common or “normal,” or using language that suggests that behavior change is difficult. Consider the following best practices to make sure your messages are safe and effective:

- Don’t use inflammatory messaging about firearms that may lead to opposition among firearm owners and hurt partnership efforts. It’s important to work with firearm owners, rather than against them.
- Don’t frame suicide as having a single cause.
- Don’t describe suicide as an “epidemic” or suicide rates as “skyrocketing.” Stick to less sensational language, such as “a public health concern.”
- Stress that suicide can be prevented.
- Use messages that reinforce that safe firearm storage is feasible and an important responsibility.

For more information and guidance on developing your own messaging, see Appendix C.

## Determine Required Resources

Determine the funding, materials, and manpower required to implement each of the objectives included in your coalition’s outreach plan. List the resources you need, identify where they can be found within the community, and assess their availability to the coalition.

While discussing resources with the coalition, consider the following:

- How much funding is needed to execute the outreach plan?
- What are your potential sources of funding?
- Are there partners who can help spread the word? What is the added value of having them involved?
- How much time is needed from coalition members?

Developing your own messages and materials is also an option, but keep in mind that it can take substantial time and effort. For guidelines on creating messages, refer to the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention’s [\*Framework for Successful Messaging\*](#).

## Spreading the Word

Now that you've developed an outreach strategy and selected or prepared your coalition messages, it's time to identify which activities the coalition will use to deliver your messages to your target audiences. This is where your local knowledge will be useful: Think about how people in your community are accustomed to receiving important information, and identify ways to leverage those channels in your outreach efforts. Use the following questions as a guide when selecting dissemination activities:

- Who will your audiences listen to? Is it someone they know personally, or a trusted and influential voice in the community?
- When and where will your messages be most relevant to your audiences?
- Where do your audiences spend time in the community or online?
- Which communications channels do your audiences regularly use?
- What is the timeline for implementing the outreach activities? Are there ideal times to implement them, such as during hunting season or Suicide Prevention Month?

### Mobilize the Media

The media can be a powerful partner for your coalition, and establishing a relationship with local media outlets can lead to opportunities for them to broadcast or amplify your message. Start by appointing a media lead for the coalition who can develop a list of contacts at local outlets and then reach out to them to determine whether they are interested in your coalition's efforts.

Be sure to share relevant updates and invitations to appropriate coalition activities. Developing a good working relationship with local media representatives can provide opportunities to shape the way your message is conveyed to the community. It can be challenging to make sure that media engagement around suicide prevention and safe firearm storage does not lead to sensationalized reporting or messaging that may inadvertently increase suicide risk for some audiences. So it's important to work as closely with the media as possible to help editorial boards adhere to standards for responsible reporting.

*For more information on safe media messaging, visit [reportingonsuicide.org](https://reportingonsuicide.org)*

## Suggested Channels to Spread the Word

### In-Person Outreach

- Community events (board meetings, local festivals)
- Co-sponsored events with Military/Veterans Service Organizations
- Meetings of medical center or clinic staffs
- Events related to sport shooting or hunting
- Meetings with local and state law enforcement personnel
- Events related to Suicide Prevention Month
- Military installation public affairs offices
- Local AFSP chapters

### Print Outreach

- Local newspapers and magazines
- Newsletters and message boards
- Faith-based channels such as a church bulletin
- Posters (think about high-traffic areas)
- Military installation newspapers
- Direct mail with brochures or flyers

### Digital and Online Outreach

- Web banners
- Emails
- Social media posts or events

### TV and Radio

- Public service announcements
- News programs

## Monitoring and Evaluating Your Impact

Evaluation should be integrated into your outreach strategy, and should be based on ongoing monitoring of successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Remember that evaluation should be part of each phase of the strategy — not just something you do at the conclusion of your coalition’s efforts — so that you can continuously enhance your messaging and tactics as needed. For more information and evaluation templates, see Appendix E.

It’s important to consistently check your progress against the initial timeline, adjust for changes as necessary, and document obstacles and lessons learned for immediate and potential future use. Meaningful evaluation should increase the effectiveness of the coalition’s processes as well as the outcomes of your work. Try using some of the following activities to keep tabs on coalition progress.

- **Conduct check-ins during development:**
  - Set aside time during each coalition meeting to check the progress of ongoing activities, document challenges or successes in implementation, and identify areas for improvement.
- **Monitor implementation:**
  - Take note of benchmarks during implementation, such as the quality or completeness of materials being developed, the level of engagement during planned activities, and the numbers of social media shares or likes.
  - Ask participating audience members to share feedback, whether through a formal survey or an email with a simple bulleted list of questions.
  - Make changes as needed — don’t stick with activities or messages that aren’t resonating with the community.
- **Debrief after implementation:**
  - Hold a focus group with five to seven people to gather feedback after messaging is distributed.
  - Facilitate a moderated open discussion among coalition members, partners, and members of your audience to assess the efficacy of the strategy and identify areas for improvement. Plan to have a note taker on hand to document the group’s input.
  - Host a community-wide meeting after the outreach strategy has been fully implemented to discuss and assess the impact of the coalition’s activities. Consider developing brief survey forms to distribute during the meeting to make sure everyone has a chance to share their feedback.
- **Document lessons learned:**
  - Take time to document the lessons your coalition learned along the way. Note which strategies, messages, and activities were most effective and capture information about the challenges you faced in implementing your strategy.

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## Appendix A – Available Messages, Additional Information, and Resources

### Suicide Prevention and Safe Firearm Storage Information and Resources

The following links have additional information about safe storage of firearms and suicide prevention to help you equip your coalition with the knowledge required to make an impact in your community.

#### Firearm Safety and Safe Storage

- The [National Shooting Sports Foundation](#) offers a wide range of resources and helpful information related to the safe handling and storage of firearms, including those offered through its [partnership program with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#).
- [Project ChildSafe](#) is an initiative developed by the National Shooting Sports Foundation, the trade association for the firearms industry. The initiative is committed to promoting genuine firearm safety through the distribution of safety education messages and free firearm [Safety Kits](#).
- [Own It? Respect It. Secure It.](#) is an initiative created by the National Shooting Sports Foundation to give industry members and communities an ongoing platform to promote and encourage firearm safety and secure storage.

#### Suicide Prevention and Mental Health

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) [Veteran Outreach Toolkit](#) provides insights, experiences, and resources to shape public health initiatives that support Veterans who may be at risk for suicide. VA also has [state-level Veteran suicide data](#) that can inform your efforts in the community.
- The annual U.S. [Department of Defense Suicide Event Report](#) is a publicly available resource that provides the annual rates of suicide across each of the military services. It includes a descriptive summary of risk factors for service members who engage in suicide-related behavior.
- The [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#) (AFSP) raises awareness and provides resources and aid to those who are affected by suicide. AFSP offers a range of ways to take action and prevent suicide in your community.

#### Message Development

- The Suicide Prevention Resource Center developed [guidelines for Safe and Effective Messaging and Reporting](#), which provide valuable direction on how to communicate about suicide — both in the media and in prevention messages.
- The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention's [Framework for Successful Messaging](#) offers guidance on communicating strategically and safely about suicide. Much of the information can be applied to your coalition's messaging efforts.

#### Lethal Means

- The [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#) offers information on the importance of reducing access to lethal means as well as practical guidance on ways for families, health care providers, and policymakers to make a difference.
- For more information about lethal means and how it connects to suicide prevention as well as invaluable resources, visit VA's [Lethal Means Safety and Suicide Prevention](#) webpage.

## Appendix B – Outreach Letter Template

Your coalition will only be as strong as your members, so your outreach letter is an important tool. You'll need to succinctly explain the purpose of your efforts and the reason you're reaching out, and share any information that the invitee will need to know to join your coalition meeting. This template is a great place to start, but be sure to customize language to suit your needs! Consider including state fact sheets or other outreach materials listed in Appendix A to help describe your efforts.

Dear [name of invitee or generic salutation],

Safe storage of firearms is a key concern for our community. With widely available storage resources and information promoting the importance of securing firearms, we hope all firearm owners will practice responsible, safe storage. We need your help to make sure that safe storage of firearms is the norm in our community.

Along with representatives from [other prominent organizations affiliated with the coalition], we are exploring strategies to address this need. Please join us for this open discussion at our initial coalition meeting on [meeting date and time] at [meeting location].

Your expertise with [reason for invitation to the coalition] would make you a valuable partner in our efforts, and any contributions would be an immense help. Together, we can determine what more we can do as a community to promote safe firearm storage.

Please contact [event point of contact] at [phone number and email address] to confirm your attendance or obtain further information.

Sincerely,

[Your signature]

It is also helpful to share any contextual information with your invitation letter, such as a meeting agenda or overview describing the issue that you're organizing around.

## Appendix C – Message Mapping Exercise

Your outreach strategy is a bird’s-eye view of your messaging activities and the decisions that you’ve made along the way. **Use this worksheet** to map the various messages available in this toolkit to your audience(s), objective(s), dissemination activities, and delivery channels, among other areas of focus.

First, choose the key audiences your message will focus on — you’ll need specific messages for different groups and may need different channels and methods to reach each audience. Next, identify an available message(s) for each of your priority audiences as well as any potential issues to address and desired actions for them to take. Repeat this process for each target audience you’ve identified.

1. **Audience(s).** Who do we want to reach with our messages?
2. **Objective(s).** What are we trying to accomplish? What is the action we want to motivate our audience to take? How does it support our outreach strategy? How does it support behavior change?
3. **Potential Barriers.** Why might our audience not attend the event or participate in the outreach activity? What are the negative effects if our objective is not achieved?
4. **Motivation.** Why should our audience care about our message? What incentives will our audience respond to?
5. **Message Delivery.** What communications channels does our audience prefer? Where will the audience be most receptive to our message?
6. **Next Steps.** These are the desired immediate actions:
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.

## Appendix D – Timeline for Messaging Activities

Use the following questions to flesh out outreach activities and develop a timeline for message dissemination. What will you need to communicate over the course of your coalition's efforts? When will you need to share that information? List the key dates to chart what you need to do and when. If possible, consider timing some of your outreach activities to tie in with other newsworthy events, and stagger efforts to stay on your audiences' radar.

**Questions to Ask While Developing a Timeline.** Describe your outreach activity and messages. Where will it occur? Who is responsible for message dissemination? What tools and materials are needed to conduct the activity? Repeat this process for each identified activity.

1. What:
  
2. Where:
  
3. When:
  
4. Who:
  
5. How (tools and materials):

You can also identify, or at least anticipate, potential opportunities that may emerge from each activity (e.g., follow-up outreach). Describe those opportunities here:

Next, document your activities, progress, and implementation using the attached template titled ***Sample Coalition Timeline.xlsx***.

## Appendix E – Evaluation Worksheets

Evaluation is a critical but often overlooked component of communication efforts. It involves outlining how and when you will evaluate your outreach strategy and defining the measures you'll use to gauge your progress. How will you know if your plan is working?

### *Items to Consider During the Planning Process*

It's important to plan out your evaluation measures before starting your campaign and to update your evaluation planning based on shifts in your timeline. A range of metrics can be used to capture feedback on your outreach strategy; it is up to you to determine what data will be most useful.

**Metrics.** Below are several examples of metrics to consider collecting and tracking in your outreach strategy:

- Number and frequency of requests you receive for materials or information
- Number of people who attended a promoted event or engaged in an outreach activity
- Website visits (both unique and repeat visits), social media engagement (shares, likes, retweets, and other platform analytics)
- Positive news stories or stories promoting your message in local or national media
- Responses to paper surveys distributed before or after an in-person event
- Outcomes of in-person interviews (formal with specific/predetermined questions, or informal for general feedback)

**Outcomes.** When discussing potential outcome measures, consider asking your team some of the following questions:

- Did participants stay for the entire event?
- Did the participants represent the audience (parents, policymakers, youths) we aimed to attract?
- How well was our message received or understood by our target audience? How do we know?
  - Note: Changes in community attitudes and individual behavior are difficult to measure and require more intensive, long-term evaluation.
- Do key stakeholders express support for our work? Why?

Remember that collecting some data will require substantial effort — such as implementing surveys or making long-term observations — and plan accordingly based on the resources available to your coalition.

## Evaluation Tracker

Keeping track of what did or did not work (and why) is the best way to apply lessons learned to your future efforts. Use the attached template titled **Sample Evaluation Tracker.xlsx**, which illustrates how the evaluation of the process or outcome of each activity may be tracked.

**Evaluate and make midcourse corrections as needed.**

## Items to Consider During Implementation

- During each coalition (or planning) meeting, set aside 5–10 minutes to assess progress for ongoing or planned activities.
  - Ask members what challenges and opportunities they’ve faced and what, if any, changes they suggest for activities to facilitate effective implementation. Document these items and mark any changes to your outreach strategy (as needed).
  - If an activity is not reaching its target audience or no longer seems effective, address how it can be changed or adapted.

Activity/ Message	Target Date	Barriers	Facilitators	Progress Note (e.g., changes to out- reach strategy)

## Example of Post-Activity Evaluation Questionnaire

After you complete a coalition activity, reach out to participants to get their input on the event or tactic. Getting feedback from people who aren't involved with the coalition is a great way to get candid and constructive input that can be applied in the future.

### I. Impressions

- What was your overall impression of the activity? Why?
- What was the main message of the activity? Who was the target audience?
- Did this activity motivate you to do anything? If so, what did it motivate you to do? If not, why?
- Did the activity change your attitudes or beliefs on the topic? Which? How so?
- Overall, how useful was the information presented to you? Why? Was it new information?

### II. Opportunities

- What was useful or what did you particularly like about the activity? Why?
- Are there parts of the activity that you think Service members or Veterans were more receptive to? How about their families? Which? Why?
- Are there elements of the activity that were less useful than other or that you did not like? Which? Why? Did you find anything confusing?

### III. Characteristics (If you don't wish to report, leave this blank.)

- How old are you?
- What is your gender?
- Do you currently serve on active duty in the United States armed forces?
- Have you formerly served on active duty in the United States armed forces? Are you a U.S. Veteran?
- Are you a family member or friend of a **current or former** member of the United States armed forces?

Thank you very much for your time. Your feedback is important to us.

## What's Next? Sample Questions for Interviews or Focus Groups

*Note: It typically takes more than one interview or focus group to produce valid results.*

**Participants to invite:** Many different groups could be included in the debriefing process, and there are many ways to select individuals to provide feedback. Some suggested participants include:

- People who are familiar with the topic/your work (e.g., vested partners, those with firearm experience, suicide prevention experts)
- People randomly selected from a specific community (a large but defined group, such as those living on a military base)
- Members of a group (e.g., a shooting club or local Veterans Service Organization like The American Legion)
- Volunteers (e.g., those recruited through a flyer)

**Items to address before a meeting:** When and where is the meeting? How will you invite participants and track attendance? Who will be the moderator? Who will take notes to capture responses?

### Several questions to consider using:

#### Exposure

- What kinds of \_\_\_\_\_ [safe firearm storage] messaging and outreach activities do you currently see implemented in the community? What do you think of those activities? Why?
- Are you aware of or have you been exposed to any of our messaging and outreach activities? Which ones?

#### Gaps

- What gaps in our messaging and outreach activities could be addressed? How so?
- What are the disadvantages to using these types of activities in the community? Why?
- How would you rate the effectiveness of these types of activities in \_\_\_\_\_ [motivating safe firearm storage] [reducing suicide risk]? Why?

#### Opportunities

- What could we offer in our messaging and outreach activities to increase the likelihood that people adopt safe firearm storage practices? Why?
- What are the pros and cons of delivering messaging about \_\_\_\_\_ [safe firearm storage] among military and Veteran community members? Why?
- What else can be done to improve messaging and outreach about safe firearm storage and suicide prevention, more broadly, targeted toward Service members and Veterans and their families? Why?

#### Closing

- Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today?