

Universal Firearm Secure Storage Messaging for Military Service Members and Veterans

Policy Brief for Mental Health Leaders, Military and Veteran Serving Organizations, and Government Decision-Makers

Cohen Veterans Network – Institute for Quality | September 2026

With generous support from Face the Fight, Inc.



Effective suicide prevention and responsible firearm ownership are complementary goals. By implementing universal secure storage conversations that respect military culture and individual rights, leaders can help promote secure storage practices and reduce preventable deaths while supporting the safety and well-being of military-connected communities.

Problem Statement

Military service members and veterans have a unique relationship with firearms shaped by military training, professional responsibility, personal protection, recreation, and family traditions. As a result, firearms are both highly prevalent and highly valued within military-connected communities. Effective prevention efforts must therefore be grounded in respect of lawful firearm ownership and the cultural significance of firearms among those who serve and have served. This policy document supports responsible firearm stewardship through voluntary secure storage practices that can help protect individuals and families during periods of elevated risk. Firearms remain the leading method of suicide among veterans¹, active-duty service members², and military spouses³, and suicide crises are often brief, unpredictable, and undisclosed before death.⁴ Further, firearms are the leading cause of death among U.S. children and teens ages 1-17⁵ and unintentional firearm injuries are the most common firearm injury treated in VA Emergency Departments.⁶ Because it is not currently possible to reliably identify who will experience a future suicidal crisis or when an unintentional firearm injury or death may occur, broad implementation of universal firearm secure storage messaging offers a promising, evidence-informed strategy to reduce suicide mortality and other firearm-related injuries while respecting the values and rights of military and veteran communities.

Firearm Secure Storage as Suicide Prevention: Making the Case

01. Suicide Risk Among Military and Veteran Populations

Veterans and service members continue to experience a substantial burden of suicide. Suicide is the leading cause of death among active-duty personnel, outpacing accidental deaths, natural causes, and combat related deaths.⁷

The rate of suicide is **1.5-2x higher among veterans** compared to the general population.⁸

02. Firearms Suicide Attempts are Prevalent and Highly Lethal

In 2024, **over 70% of veteran suicides involved firearms**.⁹ Firearms are also the leading method of suicide among active-duty personnel, National Guard and Reserves, and military spouses and the second leading cause of death among minor dependents of military personnel.¹⁰

Suicide attempts involving firearms are highly lethal. Approximately **90% of attempts result in death**, compared to 53% of attempts involving hanging and 2% of attempts involving drug poisoning.¹¹

Preventing firearm suicide remains a strategic priority across the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, and national suicide prevention initiatives.^{12,13,14} Limiting immediate access during a crisis can save lives by creating time and distance between an individual and a highly lethal means.

03. Firearm Ownership and Storage Practices in Military/Veteran Communities

More than half of U.S. veterans own firearms, a substantially higher rate than the non-veteran population.¹⁵ Firearms are commonly owned for personal protection, sport shooting, hunting, recreation, collecting, and cultural identity. Effective prevention efforts must respect firearm ownership while promoting safety.

Research indicates that many veteran firearm owners store at least one firearm unlocked and/or loaded.¹⁶ These practices create opportunities for intervention and behavior change.

04. Secure Storage Reduces Risk

Storing firearms loaded or unlocked is associated with **3-4x higher suicide risk** compared to secure storage practices – **unloaded, locked, and separate from ammunition**.¹⁷

Secure storage practices, including use of locking devices or safes, unloading firearms, and separate ammunition storage, are modifiable protective factors.

05. Evidence That Lethal Means Safety Interventions Work

Research demonstrates that firearm safety counseling is acceptable to service members and veterans.¹⁸ Lethal means counseling, particularly when paired with free secure storage devices, can improve storage behaviors.¹⁹ Multi-component interventions, policy supports, and public awareness campaigns can help shift norms and reduce risk.

06. Acceptable Message Contents

Recent research by Cohen Veterans Network – Institute for Quality (CVN-IQ) tested a series of brief, evidence-informed firearm safety messages to identify universal prompts likely to lead to continued engagement in firearm secure storage conversations. All tested messages were similarly rated by military and veteran participants, indicating that a **broad range of messages are suitable** for universal secure firearm storage conversations.²⁰

07. WHY UNIVERSAL MESSAGING MATTERS

Suicidal crises are difficult to predict. Many individuals who die by suicide deny suicidal thoughts during screening²¹ and disclosure before death is uncommon.

Because future risk cannot be accurately identified at the individual level, **universal messaging offers a more effective population-based strategy** than approaches that only target individuals identified as high risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence from CVN-IQ's recent study on universal secure firearm storage messaging and from the broader literature suggests that these discussions are acceptable across military-connected populations, but messaging alone has not demonstrated sustained behavioral changes.²² Effective implementation should combine evidence-informed communication with practical supports from diverse sources that make secure storage a normal expectation of firearm ownership. Several approaches may help normalize and shift behaviors across this elevated risk population.

NORMALIZE SECURE STORAGE CONVERSATIONS

Normalize secure storage conversations across military and veteran serving systems and firearm organizations and retailers

Aligning with recommendations from the Firearm Suicide Prevention in the Military National Summit²³, universal approaches to secure firearm storage messaging may help normalize behaviors that promote safe environments similar to seat belt use. Incorporation of secure storage messages across a wide variety of settings, including shooting ranges, firearm retailers, and other military and veteran serving spaces will help reach a broad audience and normalize secure storage behaviors.

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“Adopting a **universal approach** for delivery to all individuals (not just those at risk) represents an **“upstream” approach to preventing suicide** that might change beliefs or behaviors before acute violence risk develops, encourage interventions with at-risk peers, support normalization of secure storage of personal firearms, and promote protective environments.

– *Firearm Suicide Prevention in the Military: Messaging and Interventions Summit*²⁴

ALLOW FLEXIBILITY

Allow flexibility in message content while maintaining core evidence-informed principles

CVN-IQ's recent research found no single evidence-based message, rationale, or communication approach emerged as clearly superior. Rather than requiring adherence to a single script, organizations should provide a menu of approved, evidence-informed messaging options that allow providers and staff to tailor conversations to individual circumstances. Messages should consistently emphasize safety, voluntary decision-making, responsible firearm ownership, and protection of self and others, while allowing flexibility in framing.

PRIORITIZE CREDIBILITY, TRUST, & CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Prioritize messenger credibility, trust, and cultural competence

Study participants consistently emphasized the importance of respectful, authentic communication and credible messengers. Training efforts should focus not only on what to say but also on how to say it. Military cultural competence, understanding firearm ownership motivations, and the ability to discuss firearm safety in a nonjudgmental manner should be incorporated into staff training. Veteran peers, respected military leaders, firearm instructors, and trusted community organizations may be particularly valuable partners for public-facing messaging campaigns.

PAIR EDUCATION WITH PRACTICAL SECURE-STORAGE RESOURCES

Pair education with practical secure-storage resources

Research demonstrates that education alone does not always produce meaningful or sustained changes in storage behavior, while pairing secure storage messages with free cable locks was more likely to create behavior changes. Organizations should pair messaging efforts with access to firearm storage devices, information on storage options, and assistance identifying secure storage solutions that align with individual needs. Efforts that reduce practical barriers to secure storage are more likely to produce measurable behavior change than communication alone.

EXPAND PUBLIC AWARENESS & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Expand public awareness and community-based outreach

Secure storage messaging should extend beyond healthcare settings into broader military and veteran communities. Opportunities include military training environments, veteran-serving organizations, firearm retailers, shooting ranges, hunting and recreational organizations, social media campaigns, podcasts, and community events. Repeated exposure through trusted channels can help normalize secure storage practices and reinforce firearm safety as a shared community responsibility.

STRENGTHEN POLICIES & INFRASTRUCTURE

Strengthen policies and infrastructure that support secure storage

Policymakers should consider strategies that increase access to secure storage tools and information, including promotion of locking devices, partnerships with community organizations, and expansion of temporary out-of-home firearm storage resources. For example, 35 states lack statewide resources to locate temporary, legal, out-of-home storage facilities. Increasing awareness of available storage solutions is particularly important during periods of elevated risk when individuals or families seek additional and timely safeguards.

CONCLUSION

Firearm suicide remains a critical public health challenge among service members, veterans, and military families. Because suicidal crises are often difficult to predict and many individuals do not disclose suicidal thoughts prior to death, universal firearm safety conversations represent a promising population-level prevention strategy. Research continues to support flexible, universal approaches to firearm safety communication that respects responsible firearm ownership while promoting practices that reduce suicide and unintentional injury risk. Leaders across healthcare systems, military organizations, veteran-serving organizations, and government agencies have an opportunity to normalize firearm safety conversations, improve access to safe-storage resources, and create environments that support voluntary adoption of secure storage practices. When implemented at scale, these efforts can strengthen suicide prevention, promote family safety, and support the health and well-being of military-connected communities.²⁰

¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Suicide Prevention. (2024). 2024 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, Part 1 of 2: In-Depth Reviews. Available from: https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2024/2024-Annual-Report-Part-1-of-2_508.pdf

² U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Suicide Prevention Office. (2024). Annual Report on Suicide in the Military: Calendar Year 2023. Available from: https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/2024/documents/annual_report/ARSM_CY23_final_508c.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bond, A. E., Tanguay, K., Daruwala, S. E., Mocerri-Brooks, J., & Anestis, M. D. (2026). Who do service members and veterans tell? Patterns of disclosing suicidal thoughts prior to firearm suicide death. *Crisis: The journal of crisis intervention and suicide prevention*.

⁵ Center for Gun Violence Solutions. (2024). *Gun violence in the United States 2022: Examining the burden among children and teens*. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2024/guns-remain-leading-cause-of-death-for-children-and-teens>

⁶ Lucero-Obusan, C. A., Wendelboe, A. M., Schirmer, P., Oda, G., & Holodniy, M. (2017). Firearm Injury Encounters in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), 2010–2015. *Online Journal of Public Health Informatics*, 9(1), e146.

⁷ Kaplansky, G. F., & Toussaint, M. (2024). US Army mortality surveillance in active duty soldiers, 2014–2019. *Medical surveillance monthly report*, 31(5), 2.

⁸ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, 2024.

¹¹ Conner, A., Azrael, D., & Miller, M. (2019). Suicide case-fatality rates in the United States, 2007 to 2014: a nationwide population-based study. *Annals of internal medicine*, 171(12), 885–895.

¹² Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee. Preventing suicide in the U.S. Military: Recommendations from the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee. 2022. Available from: <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Feb/24/2003167430/-1/-1/0/SPRIRC-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>

¹³ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2024.

¹⁴ White House. Reducing military and veteran suicide: Advancing a comprehensive, cross-sector, evidence-informed public health strategy. 2021. Available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Military-and-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Strategy.pdf> [Accessed April 29, 2025].

¹⁵ Fischer, I. C., Aunon, F. M., Nichter, B., Hill, M. L., Panza, K. E., Kline, A. C., Na, P. J., Tsai, J., Harpaz-Rotem, I., & Pietrzak, R. H. (2023). Firearm Ownership Among a Nationally Representative Sample of U.S. Veterans. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 65(6), 1129–1133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2023.06.013>

¹⁶ Nichter, B., Hill, M. L., Fischer, I., Panza, K. E., Kline, A. C., Na, P. J., ... & Pietrzak, R. H. (2024). Firearm storage practices among military veterans in the United States: Findings from a nationally representative survey. *Journal of affective disorders*, 351, 82–89.

¹⁷ Dempsey, C. L., Benedek, D. M., Zuromski, K. L., Riggs-Donovan, C., Ng, T. H. H., Nock, M. K., ... & Ursano, R. J. (2019). Association of firearm ownership, use, accessibility, and storage practices with suicide risk among US Army soldiers. *JAMA network open*, 2(6), e195383.

¹⁸ Newell, S., Kenyon, E., Clark, K. D., Elliott, V., Rynerson, A., Gerrity, M. S., ... & Dobscha, S. K. (2021). Veterans are agreeable to discussions about firearms safety in primary care. *The journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*, 34(2), 338–345.

¹⁹ Rowhani-Rahbar, A., Simonetti, J. A., & Rivara, F. P. (2016). Effectiveness of interventions to promote safe firearm storage. *Epidemiologic reviews*, 38(1), 111–124.

²⁰ Cohen Veterans Network – Institute for Quality. (2026). Optimizing firearm secure storage messaging for military and veteran communities: Development, testing, and recommendations.

²¹ Bond et al., 2026.

²² Rowhani-Rahbar, et al., 2016.

²³ Betz, M. E., Stanley, I. H., Anestis, M. D., Bryan, C. J., Buck-Atkinson, J., Carey, N., ... & Wright-Kelly, E. (2023). Firearm suicide prevention in the US military: Recommendations from a national summit. *Military medicine*, 188(9–10), 231–235.

²⁴ Betz et al., 2023:233.