

# **Strategies and Interventions for Promoting Means Safety**

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# Disclaimer

This presentation is based on work supported, in part, by the Department of Veterans Affairs, but does not necessarily represent the views of the Department or the United States Government.

# Presentation Overview

- Introduction to means safety for suicide prevention
- Addressing access to lethal means (firearms) for Veterans at increased risk for injury
- Examples of VA means safety initiatives implemented in multiple settings
- Conclusion and next steps

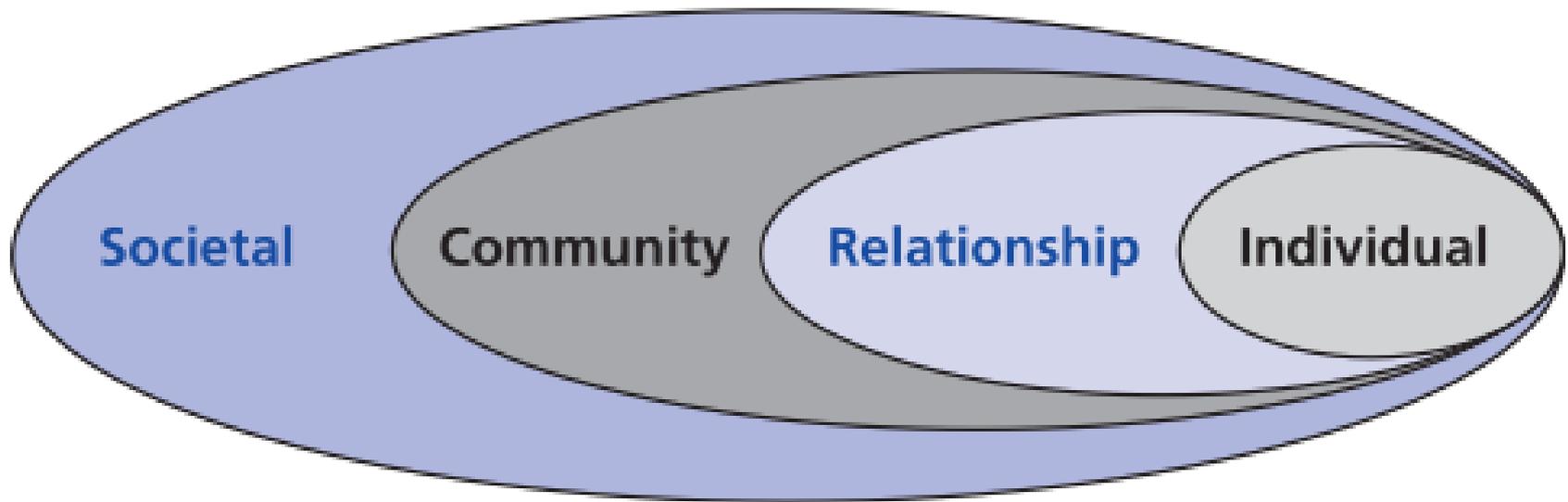
# The Role of Means Safety in Suicide Prevention

- Limiting access to highly lethal means is one of few evidence-based suicide prevention strategies<sup>1</sup>
- Lethality varies greatly by method used in suicidal acts
- The majority of attempters who survive a nonfatal attempt will not go on to die by suicide<sup>2</sup>

# Addressing Access to Firearms for Veterans at Increased Risk for Injury

- Firearms most lethal means associated with suicide mortality<sup>3</sup>
- Common method used in U.S. suicides **(51%)**<sup>4</sup>, and even greater among some Veteran populations
  - nearly 70% of suicides among *VA users* were by firearm<sup>5</sup>
- Safe storage practices can decrease risk for injury among household<sup>6,7</sup>, underscoring the significance of identifying promising intervention

# A Socio-Ecological Framework for Prevention



Dahlberg LL, Krug EG. Violence—a global public health problem. In: Krug E, Dahlberg LL, Mercy JA, Zwi AB, Lozano R, eds. World report on violence and health. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; 2002:1–56.

# Example 1: Universal Firearm Safety Programs

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

No one can un-fire a firearm.

For someone in crisis, a locked firearm can mean the difference between a tragic outcome and a life saved.

Watch an informational video and learn more at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net)

 Veterans Crisis Line  
1-800-273-8255 PRESS 1

••• Confidential chat at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net) or text to 838255 •••

# Public Education to Promote Firearm Safety

- Targeted education and outreach activities, including **public education messaging**, have the potential to improve firearm safety beliefs and practices within defined populations
- Evidence that campaigns (messaging) can have small-moderate effects, but wide reach translates into considerable population-level impact<sup>8-10</sup>
- Messaging functions as a *catalyst* for change by providing information that can both influence **individual characteristics** and facilitate the **development of larger environments** that validate and motivate firearm safety

# VA Messaging: Gun Safety Matters

- The VA has developed a PSA and associated education materials promoting firearm safety practices, raising awareness of risk associated with access to firearms during periods of distress and recommendations for safe storage
- Content was tailored for Veterans and their families and informed by consideration of military culture
- Developed in collaboration with the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), Harvard Injury Control Research Center and VA Suicide Prevention Program
- Formative research is currently being conducted on exposure effects

# Translating Information into Action

- Firearm education and promotion are more effective when coupled with other safety initiatives<sup>11-13</sup>
  - Increase perceived self-efficacy by providing tool to alter behavior
- National program to distribute free gun safety locks to interested Veterans and their families
- Began in 2010 and continues today with over 1 million locks disseminated to VA medical facilities each year for broad distribution to their community
  - Contact facility Suicide Prevention Coordinators for additional information

# Example 2: Community-Based Interventions



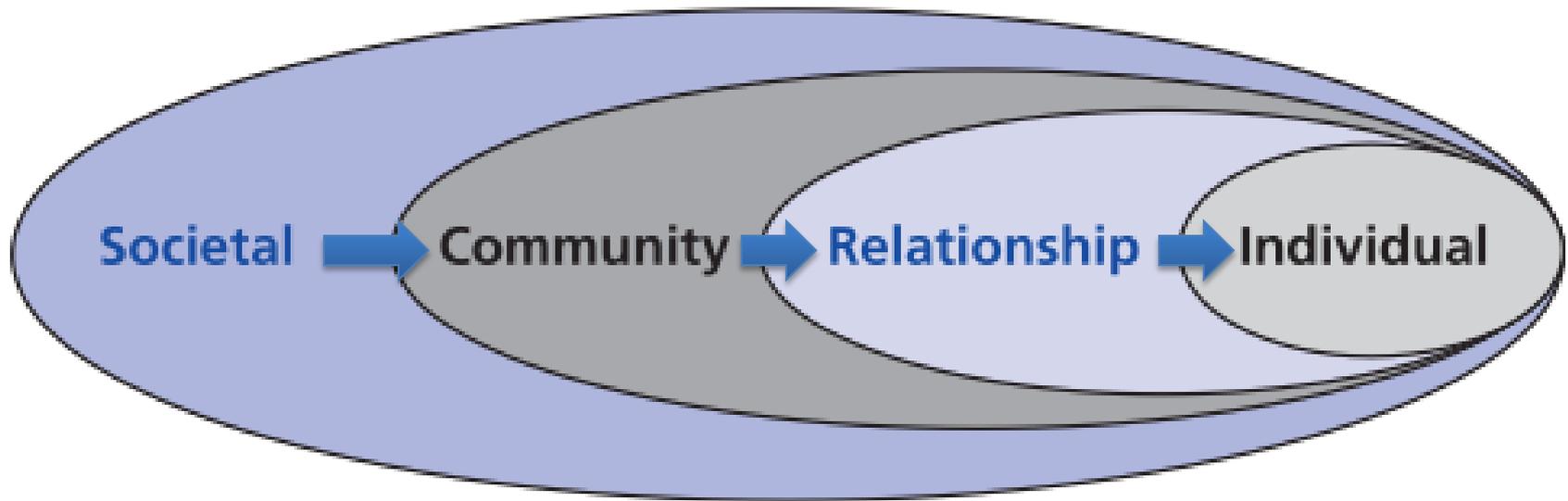
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**1 CONVERSATION**  
can open the door to support.

 **Veterans Crisis Line**  
1-800-273-8255 **PRESS 1**

Learn more at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net)

# A Socio-Ecological Framework for Prevention



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# PARTNERSHIP WITH NSSF

- Between 2010-2012 the Department of Veterans Affairs partnered with the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) to promote safe gun storage practices for Veterans and their families
- Project Child Safe
  - National gun safety education initiative
  - Included distribution of ~3 million gun safety locks and related educational material
- VA's gun safety program is modeled from NSSF recommendations for safe gun storage and access

# Gun Safety Checklist

- Keep all firearms locked and unloaded when not in use
- Store ammunition separately from firearms and out of reach from children and unauthorized adults
- Make sure firearms cannot be accessed by children or unauthorized adults
- Regularly reassess steps to assure safe storage and use of firearms, especially during periods of increased stress or emotional crisis

# Consider the Range of Options

- At a minimum, all firearms should be stored unloaded and locked when not in use.
- Other storage options may include locked gun safes, cabinets, or storage cases.
- Temporary off-site storage may be advisable if there are concerns about storing a firearm in the home.

# Home Safety Visit Project

- A home safety visit pilot project was conducted in two VA Medical Centers
  - Louisville, KY
  - Pittsburgh, PA
- Results from this project support re-evaluation of safety planning following discharge from inpatient hospitalization in the home
- A smaller effort explored the feasibility of using peers as safety specialists
- About a dozen peer specialists were trained in principals of means safety and motivational interviewing
  - Preliminary assessment of peer involvement supports continued evaluation

# Example 3: Interventions for Clinical Settings



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**1 SMALL ACT**  
shows you care.

 **Veterans Crisis Line**  
1-800-273-8255 **PRESS 1**

Learn more at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net)

# Talking to Patients about Firearm Safety

- Providers have a role to play in addressing gun safety with Veterans at risk for suicide
- Counseling those at risk for suicide can lead to safer household storage of medications and firearms (e.g., parents of adolescents)<sup>14-16</sup>
- Access is often ascertained during VA suicide risk assessments and/or safety planning
  - Build and strengthen skills to conduct such assessments within larger, ongoing conversations about risk and safety practices with patients

# ***San Francisco VA Suicide Prevention Program:***

## **Lethal Means Safety Counseling to Reduce Suicide Risk**

- Development of pilot training program on lethal means counseling (LMC) for VHA mental health service providers in VISN 21 & 4
  - Collaboration between San Francisco VAMC, Harvard Injury Control Research Center, and VA Suicide Prevention Program
- Trainings seek to teach and refine effective skills to counsel Veterans at-risk for suicide on reducing access to lethal means with an emphasis on firearms
- Material meant to inform clinical practice and produce cultural shifts of perceptions on talking about firearm risk and safety practices with Veteran patients and their families
  - Empower clinicians with skill AND confidence

# Conclusions and Next Steps

- Reducing access to highly lethal means, including firearms, can significantly modify risk for injury (intentional or unintentional) for Veterans and their households
- Multifaceted approaches to promoting means safety can expand VA's reach across the Veteran population
- Emerging area for intervention with much to consider for next steps

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# Resources

## **Veterans Crisis Line**

[www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)

## **Firearm Safety Message**

[Gun Safety Message](#) (also available on the  
crisis line website)



# Contact Information

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