

Storing guns away from home could reduce suicides, but legal hurdles loom

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Mike Hossfeld unlocked a heavy black steel door to his home's gun safe, unveiling both modern and antique firearms, some dating from the early 1900s.

"Most of this is mine. There are a few weapons in here that belong to other folks," he said.

Hossfeld regularly stores firearms for others who are going through a [mental health crisis](#) or a rough period. That puts time and space between them and their guns, which can significantly reduce [suicide risk](#).

Hossfeld first stored a firearm, for his National Guard commander, in the 1980s, after the commander talked about suicide.

"We carried our sidearms in a shoulder holster. So I just walked over and took the strap off and said I was going to store his weapon for him in my toolbox," Hossfeld recalled.

His commander recovered and was very happy to get his weapon back, Hossfeld said. And that's the whole premise, Hossfeld said, of a Montana law passed earlier this year: to make it easier to help a friend get through a mental health crisis and alleviate the immediate risk of suicide until they get better.

The law protects people who store firearms for others from [legal liability](#) if someone self-harms after picking up their gun.

Public health officials hope that will encourage more people like Hossfeld to store firearms for family and friends. They also want to encourage gun shops and shooting ranges to offer storage for the public.

Montana [public health officials](#) are creating a map of locations that store firearms, similar to other states' so-called safe storage maps.

Montana has the second-highest suicide rate across the country, after Wyoming, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 85% of Montana's gun deaths are suicides, according to state data. That's much higher than the national average of 60%.

Tough conversations

At a local gun show this spring, Lewis and Clark County Suicide Prevention Coordinator Jess Hegstrom set up a booth amid a sea of camo and pro-gun T-shirts.

"I have, like, little guns on my earrings. I'm cool, I'm friendly. I'm not here to waggle my finger at you," she said.

Instead, Hegstrom talks to people about how to bring up a tough topic like suicide, and safe storage of firearms for anyone at risk, with friends and family.

Sometimes her message is well received, but in other cases people shy away, which Hegstrom said is a sign there's still a lot of work to do to normalize conversations about firearms and suicide.

Hegstrom is working on a local "safe storage map" identifying gun shops and other locations willing to store guns for the public. She hopes it will become a statewide resource and a tool for suicide hotline operators.

Colorado, Washington, Louisiana and other states have implemented some version of a safe firearm storage map or public messaging campaign encouraging people to store firearms outside the home while at increased risk for suicide.

Legal barriers

Background check requirements and variation in state and federal gun laws give some gun shop owners pause when it comes to storing firearms for at-risk people or having their stores on a public safe storage map.

"I'm not really sure that firearms dealers doing hold agreements is really the best idea," said Ed Beal, owner of Capital Sports in Helena.

Hegstrom asked Beal to participate in the safe storage map for Lewis and Clark County, but Beal said he has a lot of questions about what is legally required under federal law when it comes to storing firearms temporarily, particularly about what background checks his shop would have to do to return a person's gun to them after they participate in the safe storage program.

Some gun shop owners participating in safe storage programs in other states say federal background check laws can also deter people from using the storage program in the first place.

Hammer Down Firearms, a gun shop outside Denver, is on the safe storage map for Colorado.

The idea of storing guns for the public is fine in theory, said co-owner Chris Jandro. However, he said, only two people have used the shop's service.

Many customers back out once they hear that they'll need to pass a background check when they come back to get their gun, Jandro said.

That background check includes questions about mental health treatment.

Having gotten treatment doesn't necessarily disqualify someone from getting a gun back, but the questions can be confusing, especially for someone in crisis.

NPR and KFF Health News requested an interview with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, which regulates gun shops, but did not receive a response.

Federal law doesn't prohibit a person from storing guns for another

person.

But in some places, like New York and Massachusetts, state laws can make doing so legally almost impossible, according to Harvard public health researcher Cathy Barber.

"In New York state, you might be a licensed gun owner, but you're still not supposed to hold on to somebody's guns, because you're supposed to register each individual gun," she explained.

The only workaround is to formally transfer ownership of a weapon at a gun shop. Ownership would have to be transferred again before the gun could be returned, Barber said.

In New York, that includes filing paperwork with the state for each gun.

Other states allow immediate family members to hold on to a relative's guns without transfer paperwork, but they prohibit extended family members or friends from doing so.

These legal hurdles just take too long to navigate during a crisis, said emergency room physician and University of Colorado professor Emmy Betz, who helped set up Colorado's safe storage map.

Betz suggested that gun transfer and background check laws include exceptions for suicide prevention. "It would make it easier to give your gun to your cousin, for example," she said.

That's what lawmakers did in Washington state. A recent law change now allows friends and extended family members, rather than just immediate family, to store a gun—if suicide is a risk.

Support from public health officials and gun

enthusiasts

It will take time to address the legal barriers and patchwork regulatory landscape, but that shouldn't deter health officials in the face of a growing crisis, said Betz. The number of suicides involving firearms pushed the national suicide rate to an all-time high in 2022, according to a KFF analysis of preliminary mortality data.

Betz said there is still a place for red flag or extreme risk laws that allow courts to legally seize firearms from someone who poses a risk to themselves or others.

But that should be a last resort, she said.

Gun rights advocates are coming around to the idea of voluntary safe storage. Jason Swant was chairman of the board of Prickly Pear Sportsmen's Association for 13 years. The association operates a shooting range in Helena.

Swant said he overcame his initial reluctance and started working with Lewis and Clark County health officials after hearing the stories of people who loaned their guns or held someone else's guns to avert a crisis. "That made a difference," he said.

There isn't a lot of data on how often people use public safe storage options or ask friends or family to hold on to their guns to reduce suicide risk.

According to a survey of Colorado and Washington state gun owners, a little over a quarter of respondents had stored a [firearm](#) away from home in the last five years. However, they could have been storing guns for reasons beyond suicide risk, like during a long vacation or visit from grandchildren.

Researchers in Colorado are planning a study to gather more information on how often people store guns outside their homes to prevent [suicide](#).

Making it normal to ask for help

It's going to take repeated and widespread messaging campaigns to truly change people's behavior, said Barber, the Harvard researcher.

"You need the kind of message saturation that we've got with designated drivers and 'friends don't let friends drive drunk,' where you're seeing it in TV shows, on movies, you're seeing it in PSAs," she said.

Some gun enthusiasts want to help.

Peter Wakem, a North Carolina-based custom gun case designer, said he has periodically gone into crisis over the years. When that happens, his friends take his firearms and change the code for the safe at his shop.

He started talking about his experiences on various gun-oriented podcasts to promote the idea of safe storage. He has a list of people to call "when things start going dark." He also keeps a note to himself in his gun safe in case he needs to be pulled back from the brink.

"Time to reach out, things will get better, you're not weak. You're doing the right thing. Make the phone call. Signed, Future Pete," the note reads.

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