

**Vermont Suicide Prevention and Firearm Safety Report**  
**Prepared for the Vermont Departments of Health and Mental Health**

November, 2025

Prepared by:

Debby Haskins, LADC

[debbyhaskins@gmail.com](mailto:debbyhaskins@gmail.com)

&

Tom Delaney, PhD

[thomas.delaney@uvm.edu](mailto:thomas.delaney@uvm.edu)

## Executive Summary

Suicide death rates in Vermont have trended consistently higher than US rates over the past 20 years. Firearms are involved in the majority of Vermont suicide deaths, and a public health-informed approach to reducing suicide deaths requires addressing firearms as a lethal means, including promoting safer storage of firearms. To better understand motivations for firearm ownership, current storage practices, and identify effective messages supporting safer storage, the current study interviewed Vermont firearm owners over four months in summer and fall 2025. The interviews were designed to be sensitive to the language and preferences of a cross-section of firearm owners and were conducted by a community leader who is herself a gun owner. To protect participants' anonymity and increase their comfort with being interviewed, sessions were not recorded and instead relied on a detailed note-taking approach.

Review of the interview records suggest the following as key themes around firearm ownership and storage practices: 1) broad education on firearm safe storage (gun owners and non-gun owners), 2) sustained, multi-pronged, and culturally appropriate approach to supporting safe storage practice in the community, and 3) focusing on gun owning (and gun-accessible) groups who have not been a focus of outreach and education, for example older Vermonters and caregivers of all kinds.

Based on these findings the authors recommend... 1) specific outreach to organizations and gun clubs, gun instructors and supporting older Vermonters (e.g., SASH, DAIL, AAAs, others) around recognizing risks of suicide and firearms, and supporting related safety, 2) broad support for healthcare provider organizations (including home health, palliative, primary and other care) to engage in firearm safe storage counseling and supporting safe storage practices in their patients/clients, 3) ongoing school-based and employer-based initiatives that provide firearm-specific education that includes essential suicide awareness and skills and a focus on firearms lethal means safety.

---

## 1. Introduction

In 2024, 104 Vermonters died by suicide, 59% of whom used a firearm.<sup>1</sup> Firearm suicide death rates in Vermont are higher than US national rates, likely reflecting the state's rurality and higher

rates of firearm ownership than are reported in many states. Among the means used for suicide in recent years, firearms have the greatest lethality, with over 90% of individuals who use a firearm dying as a result of the attempt.<sup>2</sup> As a proportion of all firearm-related deaths in Vermont, suicide accounts for more than 85% of lives lost.<sup>2</sup> In recognition of the important role firearms play in suicide, the 2024 Vermont Strategic Plan for Suicide Prevention highlighted the need for understanding risk factors for individuals for firearm suicide decedents and how to increase firearm safe storage, among other needed actions to reduce firearm suicide deaths.<sup>3</sup>

As one component of its approach to reducing suicide morbidity and mortality, Vermont launched the *Firearm Safety and Suicide Prevention Initiative*. This project aimed to understand firearm owners' perspectives, reduce stigma, and promote voluntary, peer-led firearm safety practices that respect Vermont's strong culture of responsible gun ownership. Between June and October 2025, 50 self-identified firearm owners from diverse groups—hunters, sport shooters, law enforcement officers, firearm retailers, women gun owners, veterans, and suicide-loss survivors—participated in key-informant interviews. This report summarizes their feedback, analyzes gun-related bias in suicide prevention conversations, and provides recommendations to strengthen Vermont's comprehensive suicide prevention strategies through authentic firearm community engagement.

---

## 2. Background and Purpose

### 2.1 State Context

The **Vermont State Strategic Plan for Suicide Prevention (2024–2029)** outlines four major directions:

1. **Community-based prevention**
2. **Treatment and crisis services**
3. **Data, quality improvement, and research**
4. **Health equity**

This firearm initiative aligns primarily with Strategic Direction #1: *Community-Based Suicide Prevention*, particularly **Objective 1**, which calls for statewide access to **secure storage and suicide prevention trainings**.

### 2.2 Public Health Imperative

As noted above, over 85% of Vermont firearms deaths in recent years were suicide, according to a recent VDH report. Firearms are among the suicide means with the highest lethality, with greater than 90% attempts using firearms resulting in death. Firearm safe storage practices have shown that improvements in safe storage are associated with decreased suicide deaths, including in military samples and families with children.<sup>4</sup> A public health-informed approach that combines a focus on suicide prevention through safe storage education, culturally attuned messaging, increasing the availability and desirability of safe storage options, and that involves

community members and leaders in implementation is likely to be effective. Having a focus on stigma reduction and promoting help-seeking behaviors is likely to contribute to reductions in suicide deaths as well. The current study attempts to provide a foundation for expanding Vermont's public health suicide efforts as they relate specifically to firearm suicide deaths, taking into account firearm owners' attitudes and with respect for Vermont's firearm owning .

---

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Design

The project utilized a **mixed-method qualitative approach** guided by principles of community-based participatory research. Four focus groups were organized across Vermont—representing self-protection owners, hunters, gun enthusiasts, firearm retailers, and professionals handling firearms (law enforcement or military). Recruitment proceeded by advertising in locations likely to be visited by firearm owners, directly asking people believed to be firearm owners to participate, and by word of mouth.

A combined interview and focus group discussion guide was developed that addressed that included introductory language and then a series of topics aligned with the study goals: 1) personal and community attitudes toward suicide prevention, 2) perceptions of firearm safety and safe-storage practices participants used, 3) messaging strategies and trusted messengers, and 4) barriers and motivators for voluntary safe storage outside the home. Participants were offered \$50 for completing an interview. The final project was present to the full committee with a power point presentation on December 2025.

### 3.2 Participant Profile

Participation in the interviews was voluntary, confidential, and geographically balanced across rural and semi-urban areas. Almost all participants were interviewed in 1:1 phone calls and Zoom meetings , with no identifying information being collected in the interview notes. Of the 50 participants, 65% identified as hunters, 10% as self-protection owners, 10% as enthusiasts, 10% as law enforcement, 3% as women, and 2% as survivors of suicide loss.

---

## 4. Findings: Voices of Vermont Gun Owners

### 4.1 Education

Participants strongly emphasized **education as the cornerstone of firearm and suicide safety**. Many advocated for teaching firearm safety and mental-health awareness early, through schools, hunter-education programs, and inter-generational family discussions. They stressed the importance of the non-gun owner to also receive safety training. Another group they identified as needing training was the elderly.

*“Kids should learn firearm respect and mental-health awareness at the same time they learn hunter safety.”* – Hunter, Caledonia County

### 4.2 Mental Health Access and Stigma

Participants expressed frustration about limited, slow, or impersonal access to crisis or counseling services. They recommended **local, stigma-free mental-health options** and clinician training in **Lethal Means Safety Counseling (LMSC)**, a strategy supported in Vermont’s Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Grant

### 4.3 Safe Storage

Gun owners advocated **voluntary, peer-modeled safe storage** over mandates or regulation. They supported having free distribution of locks and safe-storage devices through **trusted partners** such as gun shops, ranges, veteran organizations, and local law enforcement.

*“Don’t tell us what to do—show us that other gun owners we trust are doing it.”* – Law Enforcement Officer

### 4.4 Trust and Engagement

Trust emerged as the **central theme**. Participants preferred outreach led by **respected firearm owners, veterans, and instructors**. They were more receptive when messages were framed as **“care and responsibility”** rather than **“control and restriction.”**

### 4.5 Substance Use Connection

Gun owners recognized that **alcohol and drug misuse** often increase impulsivity and suicide risk. They endorsed integrating substance-use prevention into firearm-safety and suicide-prevention messaging, particularly in rural communities.

---

## 5. Gun Bias and Communication Barriers

### 5.1 Understanding Gun Bias

“Gun bias” refers to unconscious or explicit assumptions that firearm ownership equates to risk, aggression, or irresponsibility. Participants often perceived **institutional bias** in media, health systems, and prevention campaigns. Research supports that **stigmatizing language or judgmental framing decreases engagement** with firearm-owning communities (Betz & Stanley, 2016; Slovic & Peters, 2020).

Gun bias manifests as:

- **Overemphasis on regulation** instead of partnership
- **Failure to distinguish** between suicide prevention and gun control
- **Limited visibility** of gun-owner voices in prevention design

### 5.2 Consequences

Bias leads to mistrust, defensive attitudes, and withdrawal from collaborative prevention efforts. Focus-group participants described feeling *“talked at, not talked with.”*

### 5.3 Addressing Gun Bias

To counter bias, suicide-prevention professionals must:

- Engage firearm owners as **co-educators**, not subjects of intervention
- Use **inclusive, non-politicized language** (e.g., “secure storage” rather than “gun safety law”)
- Highlight shared values—**protection, responsibility, family safety**—as common ground

In addition to the above, professionals and training providers should consider taking basic firearms course in which they handle firearms and gain basic skills that will support their effectiveness in counseling on safe storage.

## 6. Thematic Integration with Vermont’s Strategic Plan

Findings from the 2025 firearm focus groups directly align with Vermont’s Strategic Plan objectives:

Strategic Direction	Related Findings	Recommended Actions
<b>Community-Based Prevention</b>	Emphasize peer-driven education and voluntary safe storage	Launch statewide <b>“Care &amp; Keep Safe”</b> safe campaign co-branded with shops, clubs, and veterans

Strategic Direction	Related Findings	Recommended Actions
		Firearm Safe Storage & Suicide ...
<b>Treatment &amp; Crisis Services</b>	Increase clinician competence in LMSC	Train <b>200+ clinicians statewide</b> in LMSC
		Firearm Safe Storage & Suicide ...
<b>Data &amp; Quality Improvement</b>	Track outcomes of storage and training programs	Monitor locks distributed, clinicians trained, and safe-storage adoption rates
<b>Health Equity</b>	Recognize cultural identity of firearm owners	Include firearm culture as a “community of identity” in equity frameworks

---

## 7. Recommendations

### 7.1 Expand Statewide Education

- Integrate firearm-safety and suicide-prevention modules into **hunter-education, driver’s education, and school health curricula**.
- Promote early mental-health literacy and coping-skills education in schools.

### 7.2 Support Voluntary Safe-Storage Initiatives

- Provide **free or discounted locks and safes** through gun shops, police departments, and community centers.
- Encourage **temporary off-site storage** options (friends, shops, law enforcement) during crises.
- Develop a **store-locator map** for safe-storage sites statewide.

### 7.3 Leverage Trusted Messengers

- Recruit and train **firearm ambassadors**—veterans, instructors, and law-enforcement officers—to deliver prevention messages.
- Partner with the **Vermont Federation of Sportsmen’s Clubs** and **local hunting associations** to support outreach to specific firearm-owning populations.

### 7.4 Train the Workforce

- Mandate **Lethal Means Safety Counseling (LMSC)** training for behavioral-health and primary-care providers.
- Include guidance on addressing **gun bias**, respectful questioning, use of appropriate terminology and culturally informed communication.

## 7.5 Integrate Substance-Use and Suicide-Prevention Services

- 1) Align firearm-safety messaging with **substance-use prevention and recovery programs**.
- 2) Fund community grants that pair **safe-storage education with alcohol or opioid-use prevention events**.

## 7.6 Evaluate and Report

- Establish a **statewide data dashboard** linking firearm access, suicide rates, and safe-storage behaviors (building on the **Vermont Violent Death Reporting System**)
- Track measurable outcomes:
  - Locks distributed
  - Clinicians trained
  - Partners engaged
  - Percentage of owners reporting safer storage
  - 988 and VT Help referrals

# 8. Common Biases Affecting Conversations on Suicide Prevention and Gun Safety

Type of Bias	Description	Impact on Engagement	Corrective Approach
<b>Political Bias</b>	Equating suicide prevention with gun-control agendas	Resistance to dialogue	Clarify <i>prevention</i> ≠ <i>regulation</i> ; <u>focus on safety and well-being</u>
<b>Cultural Bias</b>	Viewing firearm culture as unsafe or fringe	Alienates rural and veteran communities	Frame discussions around <u>responsibility and care</u>
<b>Professional Bias</b>	Clinicians avoiding firearm discussions due to discomfort	Missed intervention opportunities	Train in LMSC and motivational interviewing
<b>Gender Bias</b>	Overlooking men's reluctance to seek help	Under-serves high-risk group	Promote male-friendly campaigns (e.g., <i>Man Therapy</i> ) July 2025 Advisory Group PPT
<b>Language Bias</b>	Using judgmental or stigmatizing terms ("gun problem")	Triggers defensiveness	Use neutral language ("secure storage," "reducing risk")

## 9. Limitations

While the project engaged diverse firearm owners statewide, certain groups—particularly **women firearm owners** and **BIPOC Vermonters**—were underrepresented. Future studies should include more diverse voices and quantitative analysis of storage behavior changes following outreach campaigns.

---

## 10. Conclusion

Vermont’s firearm owners share a profound commitment to safety, responsibility, and community protection. Their insights highlight that **education, trust, and voluntary action**—not regulation—are the pathways to reducing suicide deaths involving firearms.

By embedding these perspectives within Vermont’s **State Suicide Prevention Plan (2024–2029)**, the state can model a balanced, respectful approach that unites public-health and firearm-owning communities in a shared mission: **saving lives while preserving rights**.

The findings of this focus-group study underscore that firearm safety and suicide prevention are not opposing efforts but **mutually reinforcing expressions of care**—for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

---

## References

1. Annual Suicide Data Report: Data Through 2024. Vermont Department of Health. [hsi-injury-2024-suicide-report](#)
2. Firearm Storage Practices among Vermont Adults (April 2025). Vermont Department of Health. [hsi-brfss-firearm-storage-2025](#)
3. Vermont Departments of Health & Department of Mental Health. (2024). *Vermont State Strategic Plan for Suicide Prevention 2024-2029*. [Strategic Plan for Suicide Prevention 2024-2029 | Department of Mental Health](#)
4. Miller, Wertz and Swanson 2025. Firearm storage and firearm suicide. JAMA Network Open. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.19266
5. Vermont Department of Health. (2025). *Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Grant Advisory Group – July 2025 Meeting Slides*.

- Betz, M. E., & Stanley, B. (2016). *Firearm discussions in medical practice: Barriers and opportunities*. **Annals of Internal Medicine**, **165**(8), 543–550.
- Slovic, P., & Peters, E. (2020). *Risk perception and affect: Bridging cultural divides in firearm policy*. **Journal of Risk Research**, **23**(9), 1125–1142.