

Gun Safety Teams: Prevention Using Public Health Strategies

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Pitt County, North Carolina, is a growing community that recognizes the need for firearm safety and safe storage education. In 2021, stakeholders convened for the inaugural Pitt County Firearm Safety Coalition meeting. The team meets regularly to discuss local data and to implement firearm injury prevention strategies.

Pitt County is located in the northeastern part of North Carolina and is home to approximately 179,000 citizens [1]. Greenville is the county seat [2], and one of the fastest-growing urban areas in North Carolina [3]. Just outside of the Greenville city limits are 10 rural municipalities [2], most of which bring a slower pace, the beauty of farmland, and a love of the outdoors. Pitt County draws hunters from all over the state, and for many in the area the first day of hunting season calls for a day off of work. Firearms are a part of the culture, and hunting is a rite of passage for many youth.

While firearms may be a part of many households in Pitt County, we recognize that cultural normalcy can lead to complacency and lack of safe storage. We need to protect the veteran who is struggling with depression and shield the curious three-year-old who finds an unsecured firearm in the nightstand. Safe storage of firearms is critical in preventing death and injury by firearm [4].

History

From 2017 to 2020, Pitt County and ECU Health Medical Center saw a consistent upward trend in the number of firearm deaths and injuries (unpublished data).

When looking for a way to combat these rising numbers, the Eastern Carolina Injury Prevention Program (ECIPP) at ECU Health Medical Center sought guidance from the well-established Durham County Gun Safety Team. Even though the suicide rates had decreased slightly in 2020, the social isolation and economic turmoil brought on by COVID-19 had impacted the mental well-being of many [5]. In March 2021, ECIPP partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to launch the Pitt County Firearm Safety Coalition (PCFSC). The mission of the PCFSC is to reduce death and injury related to firearms through broad-based and preventive strategies that promote a safe and violence-free environment for all ages. The vision is a community where every citizen feels safe from gun violence and injury. Our team is a nonpartisan, apolitical, multisector coalition aimed at the reduction of death and injury from firearm violence and self-harm using public health strategies.

Who is On the Team

The PCFSC is comprised of a passionate team of community stakeholders. There are many professionals represented in our group, including health care providers, law enforcement, school administration, faith leaders, social services, the justice system, and the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Although professional input is needed and important, those in more frontline roles with lived experience bring key input to the team. We engage individuals from shooting ranges, gun retail shops, local

hunting clubs, and families that have lost loved ones to gun violence or suicide by firearm. One of our strongest advocates is a concerned citizen who has the time to connect with invested community partners. She is passionate about firearm safety, and the behind-the-scenes role that she plays is invaluable. While each stakeholder brings their own perspective to our bimonthly meetings, we all agree on the common goal of promoting firearm safety.

Key Components: Education, Dissemination, and Intervention

A critical component to our success has been intentional analysis of Pitt County and ensuring that our educational strategies align with the area's unique culture. We continually evaluate our county's data and share this information with our coalition members and as a part of community education as well. While we may be the experts on the data, we recognize that we are not always the experts on the subject of firearms. Humility is paramount. Language is another key factor; for many, using the word "gun" builds walls and feelings of politics and controversy. We intentionally use "firearms", as it feels less abrasive and confrontational.

Not only does the coalition provide firearm safety education, we also distribute free gun locks. We realize that a loop lock may not be the best storage option for every gun owner, but offering the locks generates conversations on all safe-storage options. Team members serve as liaisons between their networks and the coalition, allowing for a much wider educational reach.

Conclusion

In the United States, firearms have become the leading cause of death and injury in individuals aged 0-24 [6]. Safe storage of firearms is key to preventing these trag-

edies [7]. Through collaborative efforts with key stakeholders, gun safety teams such as the PCFSC can play an integral role in preventing death and injury. NCMJ

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