

# Preventing Firearm Suicide Among White Men Who Own Firearms in Greater Minnesota

*Findings from Interviews with Firearm Owners and National Messaging Experts*

Authors: Melissa Serafin and Anne Li

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451 Lexington Parkway North | Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700 | [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)

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# Key findings and recommendations

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## ***Ensure messaging about firearm suicide prevention comes from the firearm-owning community.***

- ✓ Firearm owners and national experts emphasized that firearm owners themselves are the most trusted messengers, including firearm-related groups and organizations (e.g., gun shops, hunting groups, firearm safety instructors). These messengers are best suited to provide legitimacy and ensure saliency of messaging efforts.
- ✓ National experts also described the importance of actively and authentically seeking partners within the firearm-owning community to collaborate on suicide prevention efforts

## ***Frame firearm suicide prevention messaging in a way that underscores gun rights.***

- ✓ Firearm owners and national experts agreed that messaging should immediately convey the legitimacy of owning firearms.
- ✓ Additionally, messaging should avoid conveying the perception of anti-gun bias, including the idea that firearm access or ownership should be restricted.
- ✓ Firearm owners and experts also emphasized the importance of considering the heterogeneity of the firearm-owning community when crafting messaging and tailoring messages accordingly.

## ***Focus on raising mental health awareness, debunking myths, and addressing stigma.***

- ✓ Firearm owners and national experts identified a need to improve understanding of mental health concerns; debunk myths about suicide, mental health, and mental health services; and address stigma. Additionally, they identified a need to help people have conversations about mental health and express concerns people may have about a loved one.
- ✓ They suggested incorporating content that could improve understanding of these topics within messaging efforts.
- ✓ However, some findings indicate that this type of information needs to be carefully crafted to ensure salience, as firearm owners may not view mental health and suicide as relevant to their personal lives.

## ***Share stories of lived experience.***

- ✓ Firearm owners suggested incorporating real stories related to firearm suicide, seeking mental health support, and the potential consequences of unsafe storage. Additionally, they suggested that these stories should involve people with identities that firearm owners could identify with.
- ✓ They described how storytelling may be particularly effective in ensuring messaging resonates with firearm owners and dispelling myths about mental health, suicide, and safe storage.

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***Focus messages on safety, protecting loved ones, and empowerment.***

- ✓ Firearm owners and experts identified safety and protecting loved ones as values that may particularly resonate with firearm owners, as they align with existing traditional values that are common among the firearm-owning community.
- ✓ They also suggested framing messaging around empowerment and sharing steps firearm owners can take to prevent suicide, encourage help seeking, and avoid firearms being used in unintended ways.
- ✓ Both groups emphasized the importance of avoiding guilt and the perception that messages are telling firearm owners what to do.

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***Consider ways to promote the many different forms of safe storage and reduce related costs.***

- ✓ Firearm owners and experts emphasized that safe storage can take many different forms, and that offering options to firearm owners may increase the likelihood of engaging in safe storage practices.
- ✓ They also identified cost as a barrier to safe storage and suggested finding ways to reduce costs for firearm owners, such as providing free equipment or subsidizing the costs of equipment.

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***Support opportunities to increase social connection.***

- ✓ Firearm owners and experts identified a need to increase social connection, particularly among men living in rural areas.
  - ✓ They suggested increasing opportunities to have one-on-one conversations and build social support, as strong relationships can contribute to positive mental health and encourage conversations about mental health.
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## Background

In 2021, Protect Minnesota contracted with Wilder Research (Wilder) to better understand how to communicate with white men who own firearms and live in greater Minnesota about mental health and suicide prevention.

This project included interviews with national messaging experts and white, male, firearm owners in greater Minnesota. Throughout this report, we will use the term “firearm owner” to refer to this population.

This project focused on white men who own firearms in greater Minnesota because of the significant level of need among this population. In 2019, the majority of people who died by suicide in Minnesota were white (86% of all suicides) and male (76% of all suicides), and men were twice as likely to use a firearm than women.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, firearm access is associated with increased suicide risk,<sup>2</sup> and suicide rates are higher in rural areas compared to urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

## Methodology

### *Key informant interviews with national messaging experts*

Wilder interviewed eight key informants with expertise in messaging related to gun safety, safe storage, and mental health and suicide prevention in firearm-owning communities across the country, with a particular focus on men living in rural areas. Wilder and Protect Minnesota worked together to identify these respondents, including those familiar to Protect Minnesota and the project’s funder, the Joyce Foundation, as well as respondents identified through Wilder’s search efforts. Respondents were asked for their suggestions related to framing messages about firearm suicide prevention and firearm safety, messaging dosages, barriers to safe storage, and community-based solutions to reduce firearm suicides.

### *Interviews with firearm owners in greater Minnesota*

Initially, Wilder proposed holding two listening sessions with white men who own firearms and live in greater Minnesota. However, there were significant recruitment challenges, with very few men indicating interest in participating despite extensive outreach efforts by Wilder. Due to these challenges, Wilder pivoted to conducting one-on-one interviews instead. Wilder eventually recruited 22 respondents through multiple avenues, including: asking respondents for other men that might be interested in participating; inviting other

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/suicide/documents/2019mnsuicidedata.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/risk/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/ruralhealth/Suicide.html>

Wilder staff to share the opportunity with family or friends that met the eligibility criteria; and reaching out to related organizations and businesses, including gun shops, shooting ranges, firearm shooting and safety instructors, behavioral health providers and organizations, and sheriff's departments, fire departments, and other emergency response services.

Respondents were asked for their suggestions for trusted messengers who could share communications about firearm suicide prevention, suggestions for framing messaging and the types of content that should be shared, their reactions to specific phrases, the safe storage practices they engage in and how to encourage safe storage, and how they and other firearm owners would respond to a mental health crisis and the barriers that prevent people from intervening in a crisis. Respondents received a \$30 gift card to thank them for their time.

### ***Limitations***

Note that there are several limitations of this project, including small sample sizes of national messaging experts and firearm owners. The firearm owners who agreed to participate in an interview self-selected, and they are likely more open to discussing and supporting suicide prevention efforts that involve firearms compared to other firearm owners. Several respondents explicitly shared that their firearm-related beliefs are more moderate or less conservative, and/or that they are more open to discussing firearm issues than other firearm owners they know. Additionally, some respondents were recruited through respondents who had already completed an interview; thus, there may have been greater similarity between the respondents.

# Key informant interviews with national messaging experts

This section outlines the findings from the key informant interviews with firearm suicide prevention messaging experts. Given the small number of interviewed messaging experts, findings are not presented in a specific order. Wilder focused on presenting the themes mentioned by two or more messaging experts but included some themes that were only reported by one, given the small number of interviewed messaging experts.

## Content and framing suggestions

For messaging to white, rural, firearm owners to be effective, messages need to be tailored to this specific population, including their culture, needs, and attitudes. Messaging experts made the following suggestions regarding general messaging:

- **Understand the significance of firearm ownership** to culture and identity.
- **Respect the rights of firearm owners, underscore the legitimacy of owning a firearm**, and recognize that people have many reasons for owning firearms, including recreation, protection, and culture and tradition. Similarly, messaging experts emphasized the importance of recognizing that many firearms owners distrust and/or are skeptical of messages regarding firearms.
- **Improve understanding of mental health**, including providing information about warning signs, addressing mental health stigma, and debunking myths about what suicidal ideation looks like or who it affects. Additionally, some messaging experts emphasized the importance of carefully crafting this type of message, as some firearm owners may not consider mental health concerns or suicide relevant to their personal lives.
- **Frame firearm owners as the experts**, and **focus messaging on empowerment** and the steps firearm owners can take to prevent firearm suicide and protect their loved ones.
- **Be transparent about the purpose of the message**, as firearm owners may be distrustful or skeptical of related messages that come from messengers unaffiliated with the firearm-owning community.
- **Collaborate with firearm owners and people who have lived experience** when crafting messages to ensure messages resonate and are well-received.
- **Consider age and generational factors** in messaging initiatives. Messaging experts shared that older adults may be more likely to receive messages via the radio and seek help from primary care physicians, while younger firearm owners may be more likely to receive messages via social media.

- **Prioritize reaching people who may not have strongly held opinions** about firearm safety and safe gun storage, as they may be more open to hearing messages regarding firearm suicide prevention.
- **Share multiple methods of safe storage**, accounting for different levels of risk and situational factors (e.g., young children in the home; someone in the home that may be considering suicide). For example, if there is not an immediate concern about a certain individual, it may be more effective to emphasize the potential of theft to encourage safe storage. Similarly, use the term “safer storage,” to encourage firearm owners to take any steps they can to more safely store firearms.
- **Demonstrate safe storage methods that still ensure quick access to firearms**, and emphasize that safe storage is **temporary**.
- **Emphasize that safe storage is a part of responsible firearm ownership**, and frame safe storage as a way to **protect loved ones and prevent injury**.

They also suggested avoiding the following:

- **Paternalism, judgement, conveying a loss of autonomy or freedom**, or implying that the message is telling firearm owners what to do.
- **Terminology that is not used by the firearm-owning community**, such as “weapons.”
- **Content or terminology that could be viewed as political or biased** (e.g., “restriction,” “gun control,” “government”).

*Don't make a person feel grilled about having a gun at home. Mention strategies that could be helpful... Stressing that it's voluntary, and steering away from "shouldn't do this."*

*Be really careful to say that veterans [as firearm owners] are the experts, and they may have familiarity that others may not... Acknowledge that they are the experts. That is important for them.*

*When people who don't like guns get together and create material, [it's noticeable and ineffective]. Negative data or doom and gloom message. You get the feeling that these people don't like guns... It's fear-based messaging, and it's not something gun owners positively resonate with. Use gun embracing message.*

*There are reasonably easy ways to talk about perceptions about safe storage, and how it could look and how it could work. For example, framing conversations around some of the concerns, "Here's some reasonable ways that you can safely store your firearm that don't actually increase the amount of time to get your firearm if you needed to very quickly."*

*Always try to empower [firearm owners]... Restriction is the biggest fear... Don't make gun people the villains. Give them a chance to be part of the solution.*

*[The idea is that] me and my gun are protecting my family. Protecting role. Messaging that maintains that role of protector is probably optimal.*

## Messengers and delivery formats

Messaging experts made the following suggestions regarding messengers and delivery formats:

- **Consider how each messenger may be perceived and partner with credible messengers**, such as the firearm-owning community, law enforcement, and service members. Additionally, messaging experts noted that there may be disagreement within the firearm-owning community regarding the extent to which certain organizations are considered credible, including the National Rifle Association (NRA), the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), and the Veterans Administration (VA).

Messengers that have the least credibility are those from academic backgrounds, those outside the firearm-owning community, and health care providers. Messaging experts specifically shared that firearm owners may be skeptical about why providers ask about firearms and may worry about their access being restricted if they share mental health-related concerns. Additionally, they shared that providers often do not reflect the communities they serve, and firearm owners may view them as less credible because they are less likely to identify with them.

- **Collaborate with gun shops and ranges to promote mental health resources and suicide prevention education.** Messaging experts commonly emphasized that gun shop employees are already in the business of suicide prevention and can play a crucial role in conveying the importance of safe storage and recognizing signs of someone who may be at risk of suicide.
- **Incorporate safe storage and suicide prevention messaging within existing safety initiatives**, such as firearm safety trainings. Messaging experts shared that these trainings are common among firearm owners, but they often do not include safe storage or suicide prevention information. They also suggested providing incentives or otherwise reducing the costs of trainings to increase access.

*The issue is less about finding special words, and actually collaborating and finding messengers and partners within the gun world.*

*People joke about how many bullets are needed to even shoot a deer. [Suicide prevention messaging often sounds like it comes from] someone who is not from the community... [Messaging needs to] come from trusted sources, not academics or special interest groups. People in the community that share a cultural background.*

*The most effective outreach is where point of sales happen or places where gun owners go and trust, like a shooting range, gun shop, and gear shops. And local places where guns are purchased, serviced, and accessed.*

*Placing the messaging within the context of other safety initiatives.*

## Appropriate dosage

Nearly all messaging experts were unsure about the minimum level of dosage needed to effect behavioral change due to a lack of research in this area. However, they emphasized that the messenger continues to be one of the most important factors to ensure the impact of any message.

Additionally, several messaging experts suggested that having more than one exposure to a message is more impactful. They also agreed that messaging that is more direct and interactive, such as a one-on-one conversation, is better than a single passive message, such as a message on a billboard.

## Safe storage practices

### Barriers to safe storage

Messaging experts identified several barriers to safe storage.

#### Convenience and potential for need for protection

In conversations with messaging experts in this field, nearly all brought up that for those who own a firearm for home and family protection generally want to be able to quickly have access to loaded firearms in case of emergency. They described how the cultural notion that there is a perpetual potential intruder provides firearm owners a valid reason to be ready to defend. Similarly, firearm owners often see themselves as the protectors of the family.

*Firearm access is really central to their culture and identity. It is easy for [non-firearm owners] to overlook that and the value that [firearm owners] place on guns.*

*[There is a] need to change the rhetoric that anyone is coming to get you at any time.*

*The reason people own firearms [is that they want] quick access to getting them. Personal protection. Among the people who own for protection purposes, storing it feels at odds with the reasons for having it. They want to be able to [access] it quickly, and they may be slowed down.*

*In the city versus rural, there is a big difference in response times. It's understandable that for folks that live in rural areas, they believe they need to protect themselves because no one else is coming.*

#### Cost

Messaging experts identified cost as another barrier. Firearm safes are expensive, and biometric safes are even more expensive. For firearm owners who have a lot of guns, these costs may deter firearm owners from storing firearms in safes.

*The best storage is in a safe or multiple locations. Having parts in different locations in the house would slow someone, but it gets expensive. Safes can be several hundreds of dollars.*

## Lack of understanding of unsafe storage risks

Messaging experts described how suicide-related messages often do not resonate with firearm owners, as they typically do not consider the potential suicide-related risks of unsafe storage.

*People are not aware of the risk. [The idea is that] firearms make people safer, but firearms increase the likelihood of death... [There is hesitancy to] recognize the risk, and motivation is not there to store it safer.*

## Barriers to intervening during a crisis

Messaging experts also identified existing barriers that prevent family members or friends from intervening in a mental health or suicide-related crisis, including:

- A lack of understanding and ability to recognize mental health concerns or suicide warning signs.
- Uncertainty of what the threshold to intervene is and whether their concerns are severe enough to intervene.
- Discomfort with discussing mental health and suicide.
- Risk of potentially harming the relationship.
- Added complexities around holding conversations with aging friends and family members who own firearms, such as those with memory loss or living in isolation.
- Mental health stigma and hesitancy to learn about and use mental health services.
- Discomfort with asking about firearms, or the idea to ask about firearms may not occur to some people.
- Uncertainty of what to do with the firearms once they are removed from an owner and the legality of storing guns temporarily.
- Potential safety concerns for the person intervening.

*Asking someone about their firearms is a deeply private question. It is almost taboo.*

*People aren't sure if it's "bad enough" to intervene.*

*Fear or how angry someone could get.*

*[A lack of understanding of] what are the warning signs, what are the risks, who may be at risk. It's often not explicitly, "I'm going to kill myself."*

*Figuring out how to separate a gun from an individual [is a barrier]. How many guns? Where are they? Is it a good idea to do this, or should I ask the owner? ... Unsure if they can call the police and have the firearms removed.*

## Strategies for encouraging safe storage

In addition to the messaging suggestions described earlier in this report, messaging experts also shared suggestions to encourage safe storage, including:

- **Partner with firearm owners** when developing strategies, and work with firearm-related groups to understand what safe storage techniques work for different firearm-owning communities.
- **Train people** who are used to talking with people about sensitive topics on how to have conversations about firearm suicide prevention, such as faith leaders and bartenders.
- **Develop trainings for loved ones** to create plans for safely storing firearms in moments of crisis.
- **Identify ways to reduce the costs of safe storage** and safety equipment for firearm owners.
- **Create conversation guides to model how to ask about suicidal ideation and safe storage.** Additionally, encourage people to share their concerns with their loved ones directly, using phrases such as, “I’m concerned for your safety.”
- **Create and raise awareness of community storage maps** indicating locations that are willing to temporarily safely store guns in moments of crisis.

*In periods of stress and trauma, we want [to encourage loved ones] to check in with them. [There is a need for] real conversation guides about how to have those conversations. People need to be educated about when to worry, and then how to have the conversation about the lethal means.*

*Can we distribute coupons that gets you a discount [for a safe]? Incentivizing gun shops to advertise safes, economically.*

*I would love to see a training rebate for state sponsored trainings. I don't think people want a gun and no training, it's probably just the cost [that prevents people from taking trainings].*

*What does out of home storage looks like in our communities? [It could be] storage maps of organizations and gun shops willing to provide voluntary storage. Becomes a resource.*

## Interviews with firearm owners

This section outlines the findings from interviews with firearm owner respondents. Themes are presented in this section if the idea was shared by at least two firearm owners, and they are presented in the order of how frequently they were mentioned within each section, from the themes that were identified by the greatest number of respondents to least.

### Effective messengers and delivery formats

Respondents were asked to share suggestions for trusted groups and organizations that could effectively share messages related to mental health and firearm suicide prevention, including safe storage.

#### *Outdoor, shooting, and hunting-related groups*

Respondents most frequently identified messengers related to outdoor or shooting activities, including local hunting groups (e.g., Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever), local conservation groups (e.g., Izaak Walton League), the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and gun clubs. Additionally, some respondents also suggested including mental health resources on hunting-related materials, such as the Hunting and Trapping Regulations booklet produced by the DNR.

*Local gun clubs. Frequently, many cities have firing ranges, gun sportsmen clubs, target practice but also fishing leagues. Those kinds of folks hang out and develop relationships with other men and are like-minded about gun ownership and gun rights.*

*I'm just thinking who firearm owners listen to. Maybe sportsman groups, Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited. They're focused on other things, but it wouldn't hurt to have a branch that could talk about issues with firearms in the home.*

*There are a lot of hot button issues about firearms, and the messenger is probably important in that they don't get shut down right away because they seem like they have a motive. If you're communicating to gun owners about mental health, it has to be communicated by gun owners. With the Izaak Walton League, it's heavy on conservation, the responsible stewardship, but it's made up of hunters and gun owners and people who actually hunt. I think that's a pretty solid way to go about it.*

*Maybe the rules and regulations about hunting, in that booklet the state puts out. Crisis numbers in there. Anything you can associate with a firearm, on your license when you buy it, game license, you have a poaching line, maybe a crisis line. Most people say, "Who do I call?" So putting it in more people's hands.*

## **Gun shops, shooting ranges, and gun shows, including information provided at point-of-sale**

Many respondents also suggested working with businesses related to firearms, such as gun shops, shooting ranges, and gun shows. Several respondents also suggested that safe storage information be provided to purchasers at the time of a firearm sale.

*[Gun shops] would be real effective, meeting people where they're at. It might be less threatening when presented at a gun shop or store.*

*Gun manufacturers, each gun is sold with paperwork, and they talk about kids accidentally shooting themselves. I'm not sure if they even talk about suicide there, but maybe it could be put in there.*

*Having certain events, having a Stand Down event, you might come in to shoot clay pigeons but part of that event is a 15 minute block on a real life story of a member or another male that's gone through it. Piggybacking off the firearm events that are already going on.*

*Conventions, gun shows, other related events. If you can bring in advocates or whatever to those events. It's been a few years since I've been to a gun show. I don't recall there being a lot of that kind of informational booths.*

*I would like to see, not to get political, but gun shows and gun shops to take more responsibility to ask about safety in storing, if [the purchaser has] a system in place. And letting people know that you're not alone in safely storing firearms.*

*At the shops, signs and posters, recommendations, please make sure you do this...*

*Please store your investments. Suicide by gun, this is the most common means. Posters by the ammo. That might bring some awareness to it, convince some people that they need to store more safely. Especially if you go somewhere, and your spouse comes, and she sees that, it will be on their mind. It's like when you driving on the highway, and you see the signs that say buckle up, and whether people follow it or not [is up to them]. Some people might.*

However, some respondents identified challenges with gun shops, shows, and shooting ranges, including that some firearm owners may still ignore or be put off by the messaging, that firearm owners only visit gun shops when they're purchasing new firearms or ammunition, and that shop owners may be hesitant to assist with an effort that may result in fewer sales.

*[Firearm owners] wouldn't write the number down [for mental health services] if they saw it at a gun range. It's already hard to communicate even the rules at [my] gun club.*

*It would be a store owner by store owner situation. When you walk into a gun store and ask to buy a gun, you may or may not be asked what the intended use is. I've never been asked whether I'm going to blow my head off, it's whether I'm duck hunting or deer hunting, how to find a gun that will best fit your desired use. Salesmen don't ask questions like that, imagine a car salesman asking if someone is going to asphyxiate themselves with a car. It's not the first thing people want to talk about. Short of a major cultural change about how sales works, you can't really ask gun store owners to ask that. You're asking them to discourage customers from spending money.*

*The trouble is, people who have guns, like myself, it's not like I'm buying them all the time at the gun shop. I go to buy ammo, but I'm not really there to buy guns, because I don't need any more.*

*If you went around and handed out brochures, it wouldn't hurt. I don't mean to degrade anyone, but sometimes you go to the manly man stores, a man's hunting store, the men that go there don't want to see hot pink hunting clothing. They want blaze orange and camo. To see this [type of messaging], I don't know if it would strike the way you want it to. There's a mentality at gun stores, just like men's locker rooms, places that sell axes and chainsaws. There's a male thought process that goes into that. And you might be intruding into that thought process.*

## **Firearm instructors and trainings**

Firearm instructors and trainings were also identified as effective messengers, including safety and permit to carry classes. They described how firearm owners often have high levels of trust in instructors and trainings, and that it would be relatively simple to incorporate content specific to safe storage and preventing firearm suicide, especially given the existing strong emphasis on safety.

*I certainly think they are deeply engaged in safety with firearms, not much with suicide prevention, but local firearm safety instructors. Those are commonly used in greater Minnesota. Families with younger children, who are serious about wildlife hunting and want them to engage in that will send their kids to classes offered through community ed, outdoor groups. Those would be great places to pass on that information, mental health awareness, some statistics about how suicides are most often the result of firearms.*

*And in gun safety classes, especially young kids, they could talk about gun safety. They teach everything else, how to handle, how to carry, and maybe it's mental health [concerns and how that relates to owning] a gun.*

*I think it's an appropriate place to remind that the gun can be stolen, can be used by a loved one going through a crisis, how are you going to store your weapon safely. There is a lot of promotion of gun locks by law enforcement when they do firearm safety, especially permit to carry. They provide those when you do your permit to carry and help promote. That's a good idea to incorporate that. Do you have a plan, if your loved one has a crisis?*

However, some respondents expressed concerns or identified considerations regarding incorporating these messages into firearm-related trainings. These included ensuring the person providing the training will be trusted, ensuring that the basic principles of firearm safety are prioritized over messages about mental health, and that requiring or increasing the amount of training may not impact whether someone engages in safe storage and may ultimately prevent people from receiving training.

*[Trainings] seem like a good time to talk about it, but how it's presented and who it's presented by, that's the issue. That's the problem. The idea is good, but it's only as good as the people teaching it and implementing it. If you have mental health folks, the same thing with the NRA, [if attendees] connect that to a political agenda, well no.*

*I think it's better separate. I think training is really important to have the focus on teaching people how to safely use a firearm. I don't think it would be catastrophic to introduce mental health into it, but it's mostly young people going through it, so focusing on the proper use of firearms and the basics of firearm safety is best.*

*Increasing the training requirements doesn't answer the question about why there is a loaded handgun so easily accessible... You also run the risk of is making it too hard, requiring so much more training, then the response will be, "I'm not doing it."*

## **Men's groups and other opportunities for one-on-one conversations and building social support**

Respondents also suggested men's groups and other opportunities for one-on-one conversations. They shared that one-on-one conversations may be more impactful than generic messaging, emphasizing the power of social support in encouraging strong mental well-being.

*I think, as with other problems, men teaching or meeting with men, men having groups with men. Maybe it's touted or advertised as a group of men discussing mental health issues, maybe it's easier to do it that way. Men have difficulty dealing with their feelings, so approaching it a little differently, not in a wide open forum, so a mens-only group. And maybe where it's held makes a difference too, if it were held at a VFW or a church, I don't know. Maybe it's part of a group that has some other associations, like military or some other type of service.*

*I'm fortunate and blessed that I have a men's small group from church, and we get together once a week and we, of course, talk about our faith, but a lot of them are avid gun owners and this would be a platform to talk about how we can care for each other. So those small groups, are they willing to broach the subject, throw it out there? ... Men hugging men. 50, 60 years ago, you wouldn't consider it. But the men in my group hug each other regularly, but it's taken decades of acceptance to show signs of affection... it just takes a platform, stronger bond, stronger relationship, with other men, that might harm themselves.*

*Men don't tend to seek help but will take it if someone calls them... When you talk to somebody who has gone through some of the same basic feelings, same thought processes, it makes it easier when you're dealing with a kindred spirit.*

*When I first started shooting [with other law enforcement officers], it wasn't so much that we sat around and talked about problems, we just chatted and joked and laughed, but often we talked about the things we ran into during duty. When you can get those things off your chest, release it from within, the stress starts to dissipate.*

*Veterans are really good at checking in on each other. I can tell you that for a fact. I'm on a couple phone trees, so if someone is sideways, it's like being called back to active duty, I got to go and get my brothers the help they need. We're not here to tell you what to do. Work with the components of the closed culture rather than violate the unwritten rules.*

*I read a unique thing on FB about mancamps. The first thing I thought was there, that's exactly what I'm thinking about. Going to do manly stuff, lots of different activities, exercise. That sort of idea, of men getting together and doing things, it can be therapeutic. I think that's why golf is so popular. The shooters have the same mentality. And you can tell when somethings' going on, because you know them.*

Additionally, respondents emphasized that there is a significant need to address isolation in greater Minnesota, particularly among men.

*I feel like an important element or a big reason why mental health issues come about is a lack of connection to other people. This might be a much larger issue in greater Minnesota. It's hard to develop community in a lot of ways. In certain communities, they're smaller, more close knit. It's also easier to be more isolated when you're living in a rural place, and that isolation to some degree might lead to some of these issues.*

### **Military and law enforcement**

Respondents also often identified messengers related to the military or law enforcement, such as veterans and veteran's groups, Stand Down events, VFWs, the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association, the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association, and police and sheriff's departments. Several respondents described how local law enforcement are often very familiar with the community that they serve and may have strong existing relationships with many community members.

*I'm heavily involved in pistol shooting. People in that community, there are a handful of people they follow and listen to a lot of their stuff. A lot of influencers are former military members. One thing I've found is that people within the gun community really follow and respect and listen to current and former military members.*

*Even more important are sheriffs' departments. Everyone has one. It's law enforcement, sure, but they're locally elected, and they might be better known. Might hold a bit more weight.*

*Law enforcement is trying so hard to develop that positive relationship with the public. In the rural region, we have a lot of support for law enforcement, and they still have a respected platform. I guess that's my opinion, because I have good enough relationships with them up here. They're the people you go to church with.*

*I think it would be interesting to hear professionals talk... Lieutenant Dave Grossman, talking to [law enforcement] across the country, emotional stability, religion. Phenomenal speaker. To find people to emulate what he puts forth. At least from the LE perspective, it opens the thought process that most men have.*

### **National firearms-related organizations**

Some respondents also suggested national organizations, including the National Rifle Association (NRA), the U.S. Concealed Carry Association (USCCA), the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), and Gun Owners of America. One respondent mentioned Project ChildSafe, a program of the NSSF that promotes firearm safety.

*First thing that comes to mind, with rural men and guns, [which is] a group of people who feel very strongly in what has become a very politicized issue with the Second Amendment, is the NRA... That would be a more trusted voice. From that perspective, no one is trying to communicate that guns are bad. It just has to do with the fact that men struggle to recognize and deal with depression. Technically, yes, you have the right to own guns, but not to kill.*

*Another organization is the NSSF, the National Shooting Sports Foundation. They are, unlike the NRA, they are non-partisan, non-polarizing. That's what comes to mind.*

However, other respondents specifically suggested avoiding the NRA. These respondents described several concerns related to the NRA, including that some gun owners may view the NRA as too extreme regarding gun rights, that some gun owners may view them as too willing to compromise on gun rights, and that the NRA has lost credibility recently due to mismanagement allegations.

*If we could turn the clock back, when the NRA was all about safety, and the proper usage of firearms, they would be the ideal messenger, but that ship sailed a few decades back.*

*I wouldn't even say any of the larger organizations, like the NRA. There's a lot of credibility lost, especially now, all the financial stuff. Depending on where they're at, some people think they are betraying the group. The sentiment I've got from some people is that the NRA is not going far enough, it's become a bureaucratic organization and willing to compromise, and a lot of people I know are sick of compromising.*

### **Faith groups**

Several respondents identified faith groups and communities as potential trusted messengers, and they described how these communities often provide some of the only opportunities for social connection in rural areas.

*When you get into rural America, you have stronger affiliations with their church and faith communities because there just aren't the same [social] opportunities that are available in larger cities.*

*In rural America, one sense of community is the faith community. In the city, you can go to the French meet up, climbing gyms. Lots of opportunities for engagement, ways to engage with other people. Those amenities are not present in rural America. Everywhere you go, there are religious organizations. Talking to pastors, priests, rabbis, imams, whatever. For better or for worse, you get to rural America it's predominantly white and Christian. Working with those organizations. You might not have family or friends, but you still might have a priest.*

*Our religious communities could be doing a lot more to make it more acceptable to talk about mental health issues.*

### **Schools and community organizations, groups, and leaders**

Some respondents suggested community-based messengers such as schools, community organizations and groups, and community leaders, including Rotary, Lions Clubs, Kiwanis, and county commissioners. Additionally, some respondents suggested holding community events and presentations.

*I think schools, probably, in rural Minnesota, especially in smaller communities, they're the hub of information. And in an era where a lot of people view different sources as suspect, schools at least seem like a trusted resource still... [And] the bulk of the populace will interact with schools.*

*Curriculum in our education system. Emphasis [on mental health] all the way through... I think that's another area where if we start teaching coping skills in elementary school, that would specifically help.*

*Presentations at community centers or churches, something like that. Just announce that you're having a discussion around mental health and firearms... Suggestions for firearm safety, things to be looking for. Resources to look for if you think someone is at risk of injuring themselves or not handling firearms, anger, mental health issues correctly.*

*Advertise that there's the educational forum, or a presentation regarding mental health or firearms at an organization that has obvious gun owners in it... Advertising what's available, resources available. And letting them know who to call in their community [for help with mental health concerns].*

*Maybe individuals that go into schools, visit with kids in health class, I struggle with chemical imbalance and made some mistakes because of it, and this is my victory.*

*Township supervisors, county commissioners... There are people out there who are more likely to know who their county commissioner is than the governor.*

## **Health care facilities and providers**

Respondents also commonly suggested health care facilities and providers as potential messengers, including mental health care providers and encouraging primary care providers to ask specifically about mental health.

However, one respondent noted that some patients may still choose not to share information about their mental health, and note that some messaging experts cautioned against relying on health care providers to share firearm suicide prevention messaging.

*As part of your wellness checkups, medical personnel asking those questions. I just had a physical, and most of the list of questions the doctor asked were related to mental health. If there was anything there, and if I was honest, they would have caught that. Not everyone chooses to share that though.*

*In [our] area, we have a couple really strong mental health providers, [redacted], programs there that seem well engaged in the community. They seem to be well respected.*

## **Social media**

Several respondents suggested sharing messaging on social media, including one respondent who suggested partnering with social media influencers who create firearms-related content. Additionally, some respondents described how the social media delivery format may be more effective for reaching younger firearm owners rather than older owners.

*Social media influencers, a lot of the folks I know follow some influencers on social media. A lot of the bigger influencer names are people across the country. People tied to specific sporting events. I'm heavily involved in pistol shooting. People in that community, there are a handful of people they follow and listen to a lot of their stuff. A lot of influencers are former military members.*

*Many people are dialed into social media, Facebook, that type of thing... That seems to be the method of communication these days.*

## Local media outlets

Several respondents suggested local media outlets, including radio stations and newspapers. Some respondents described how trust in local news outlets is still high compared to trust in national news outlets.

*Locally, most trusted across the board, is KAXE, a radio station, reaching most of the Northern half of Minnesota, and they do a good job of issue-focused journalism. When people think public radio, they think of left of center, but I know that's not true for them. So that's one idea that would reach a lot of people. A few years ago, 10 years ago, I would have said local newspapers, but they're kind of a dying breed. For the ones that are still out there, especially in the small communities, are still viewed as a reliable source of news, very different than national outlets.*

*Maybe a local newspaper. They do quite a few stories in the [local] newspaper, talking about mental health... They put out stories and outreach, articles, contact numbers to call.*

*National news, it's at a point where that comes on, I turn it off, I change stations. They aren't reporting, they're sensationalizing. If you go to local news, they at least appear to report news... [Town] has a local radio station, talk radio station. You can get some good local news there.*

## Mental health organizations and services

Some respondents suggested mental health-related organizations, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and specific mental health services that could be used to receive guidance in real time, such as the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

*An organization like NAMI, a mental health focused organization, they're non-partisan, do good work. There's probably not as good of awareness of NAMI, but the folks who know what they're about trust them.*

*I think with my experience with [redacted], I could see he was going through troubles and I didn't know what to say to him. And then it's just on your mind. They've come up with the 988 number. If that would have been there, I would have called it. I think that's such a great idea. To be able to call and talk to somebody to figure out what I could do, what steps I could take. I didn't know what to do. You wanted to, and I just didn't have the words. I would talk with him, but I don't have training, I don't have the words.*

However, some respondents cautioned that messaging coming from mental health organizations may not resonate with firearm owners, especially as many owners may not see a connection between firearm access and suicide.

*[With mental health-specific organizations], you think schizophrenia, and people are like, well I'm not mentally ill. It's not a great way to start. Instead, [a better message would be], "Here we have a gun owner, a parent who went through this." First and foremost, they're gun owners, versus a mental health professional who doesn't know anything about guns. There won't be any traction. It would put people off.*

## Farming-related messengers

Some respondents suggested farming-related messengers, such as dealers and suppliers of agriculture products and equipment, the Department of Agriculture, and University of Minnesota Extension offices.

*Farming is really stressful emotionally, financially. Somehow getting out the message to farmers that they can get help. Local feed stores, local places they do business, tractor dealerships, flyers, radio.*

*Who are the trusted deliverers of messages in rural communities? To be honest, the Department of Agriculture, Extension. Most of our kids participated in 4H, most of us participated.*

## Content and framing suggestions

Respondents were asked what types of content and framing may be most effective when sharing information about firearm suicide prevention and how to promote safe storage.

### Focus on safety and protecting loved ones

Respondents suggested framing messaging around safety and protecting loved ones, with some describing how safety-related messages may resonate particularly well because of the strong emphasis on safety within the firearm-owning community and the emphasis on protecting one's family within traditional ideas of masculinity.

These framing suggestions included keeping people safe, incorporating mental health-related reasons into existing messaging about firearm safety, and communicating what it means to be a "safe gun owner." Respondents also suggested creating checklists or other types of educational materials regarding safety practices.

*Gun safety may be more acceptable to some people than others. Maybe something that's more helpful, I think of the smokey bear, you can prevent forest fires. You can help prevent suicide. Thinking the best of people, and that you want to help your fellow man, your fellow human.*

*I think that everyone should keep them locked up. To protect your kids, protect the community at large. Framing it that way might be effective. So many people have a permit to carry, they talk about wanting to protect themselves, being noble. "I could stop that activity." There's some very macho branding around permits to carry. To try and roll on that, to protect your community, yourself, your loved ones, keep your firearm locked up.*

*I would couch it within firearm safety. I have personally never heard of any owner that is an avid owner, hunter, someone who just enjoys using them, I've never heard them be disgruntled or politicize safety training. So I think that would be a great way, because it wouldn't be patronizing. They understand the importance of safety. And often have experienced accidents in hunting, and they know that safety is important. Accidental discharge is common, and that would be a great place to inject another layer, in addition to accidents while hunting, and firearms are the leading cause of suicide deaths. I think people would listen to that.*

*I believe in framing for values. That is most beneficial. And whether gun owner or non-owner, regardless of political persuasion. Gun safety, responsible gun safety, is something that both sides should agree on that's a value that we have. My gun owning friends, family, when I see them operate guns, they are very safe. And if you're around them a lot, you know the potential hazards.*

Additionally, respondents specifically suggested framing messages around keeping one's family safe, emphasizing the importance of the person's role in their family, and demonstrating how their family would be negatively impacted by their suicide.

*Maybe the talking point is that your family isn't safe if it's laying around. Can we talk about safety? Are you okay with safety? And maybe that buys the time... Any amount of safety is better than none. Everything beyond a loaded gun on the kitchen counter is safer.*

*Messaging resonates more deeply with us [as conservatives] when you talk about the importance of family. Based on traditional values, let's put ourselves in that headspace. I as a gun owner, if I'm contemplating suicide, if I had to stop and think about the impact of that on my kids and my family, that resonates much more deeply than it impacts me... [If you tell someone who is considering suicide], "If you do this, you realize, the grain mill won't have a guy shoveling corn tomorrow?" Well, don't worry, there's another guy waiting to take my place. But my family, my community, the people I'm responsible to and for, that resonates more. If you do this, your child goes through life without a dad... I'm a wage earner, a supporter, it's my job to go to my kids baseball game. Connecting with the things that are important.*

*All you'd have to do is say, "Dude, that weapon that is sitting around, what if your kid ran in and grabbed it?" That is the most horrifying thing I can imagine. And for most of the guys I know. That's where the fear lives deep. What if one of my kids or their friends got a hold of it?*

## **Communicate potential risks of unsafe use or storage of firearms**

Similarly, respondents also suggested communicating the risks of unsafe use or storage of firearms, with some describing a need for "reality checking" regarding these risks, as many firearm owners view them as unlikely. They suggested communicating statistics about firearm suicide; the potential negative consequences of unsafe storage, including suicides, theft, and accidents; and that it's possible that their firearm could be used in a suicide.

*Presenting specific cases where someone has gotten access [to a firearm] that had mental health issues that [the firearm owner] wasn't aware had access or even that the person had mental health issues... Here are the statistics on people using other people's weapons for suicide attempts, or here is the number of people killed by a firearm.*

*Statistics to bear out the fact that weapons should be kept safe. Here's what happens if they're not. Here are the suicides that happen. I don't have a great idea about how to change the habit, other than saying how quickly someone can get a hold of your weapon. Or you could be the victim of your own unlocked, unsecured weapons. A lot of people die at the hand of their own gun, not just suicide. People who die because of an unsecured weapon, especially kids. Making those things known... Just getting people to think about it and talk about it.*

*[Talk about it as] unforeseen disaster. People don't see it before it happens, they don't think that it would happen to them... Suicide, kids getting a hold of the gun. [Something like], "You may think you may be the only one who knows where your gun is."*

*[Firearm owners] are not very concerned [about their firearm being used in a suicide attempt], and that ties into helping people understand the scope of the problem. Everyone thinks it can't happen to them unless it does. So providing some data about how often it happens.*

## **Raise awareness of mental health concerns, dispel myths, and address stigma**

Most respondents identified the need to raise awareness of mental health concerns, debunk common myths about mental health and mental health services, and/or address mental health related stigma. This included: raising awareness of how common mental health challenges are, including sharing prevalence data; sharing messages that normalize mental health concerns; promoting mental health resources that are available in their community, including crisis lines; and sharing information about mental health symptoms and warning signs to help people improve their abilities to recognize mental health concerns among their loved ones.

*Information on warning signs would be really important. I had an experience with this in my household, which triggered my interest in this. Being aware of warning signs helped me catch the situation before it got worse... It can seem remote unless it has happened to someone you know or someone close to you.*

*It needs to be done with humility, rather than a bunch of healthy folks saying this is what it looks like to be messed up... Presenting it in a way, realizing and acknowledging we all have issues... Somehow communicating that, no shit, we all have issues, but what are the red lines, the red flags in you and other people, and identifying resources and that sort of thing.*

*The various means of getting help. Nowadays you can get telehealth, different methods and techniques to help someone through.*

*Normalizing [seeking help. Saying], guys, this isn't that big of a deal. Obviously, suicide is a big deal, but this isn't rocket science. This is incredibly fixable. Nothing magic about it.*

*And when you say crisis center, you need to explain what that is, what is this person going to do for me. People don't know who to call when.*

Respondents identified specific myths to debunk, such as how common mental health concerns are; that anyone can be affected by mental health concerns; some concerns may seem more mild but could still benefit from services (e.g., anxiety and depression); and seeking mental health services won't end someone's career or lead to forced firearm removal.

Some respondents also specifically described a lack of understanding of mental health services, including not knowing what the counseling process looks like and a common assumption that all mental health hotlines are staffed by people in their community, leading to privacy concerns. Additionally, some respondents expressed the idea that talking about

suicide would lead to an increase in suicidal ideation or attempts, a common myth about suicide.<sup>4</sup>

*There's been a [suicide in my neighborhood recently]. I didn't know them too well. And another neighbor, a good friend, whose [spouse] committed suicide. I can't believe it. There was [another person in our community] who hung [themselves]. There has been three suicides in my [town]. And we think everyone is doing fine, you just think everyone is fine. Dispel the myth that everyone is fine. That people might need somebody, some counseling.*

*I think a lot of people would be shocked at the statistics. First of all, the number of men who kill themselves use firearms. I think people would be shocked by that. And then how many of those firearms were not owned by that individual. That would be an eye opener and promote people to lock up their firearms.*

*Just the effects of going to counseling, some people think it's going to end their career, create more issues. Some of the myths, like if you seek counseling that your career in law enforcement or military might end. What are the effects of seeking help... And the myth also of just because you're in the military or LGBT the myth is that only these groups have some sort of life event are the ones that are susceptible to suicidal thoughts. Everyone is susceptible, no matter who you are.*

*[Counseling] isn't rocket science, not magic. [Providers] aren't magicians. You have to do the work, it's very practical. The sense that I get is that a lot of men, they appreciate that, removes some of the stigma that you're broken, and it will take a medical professional's magic touch. But actually, [counseling involves] breaking it down to step-by-step and defining what progress looks like.*

*Mental health hotlines, I think they have value. Some people will use them. But it has to be a high level of confidence that it's secure and anonymous. Here's the problem, someone in rural Minnesota, they're so acculturated knowing everyone and everyone knowing them, saying that you realize this is ringing a call center in Dallas, they might say they didn't know that. This person who will answer the phone will never know who you are. So if I were talking to a farmer, they would say I'm not that stupid, not calling my neighbor's phone, but not that it's going into county social services, and my wife works there. Building out the confidence in the anonymity.*

Lastly, some respondents suggested comparing mental health to physical health and/or emphasizing that everyone has mental health, just as everyone has physical health. However, it is important to note that some research has found that emphasizing biological explanations of mental health concerns can lead to more negative perceptions of these concerns, increased stigma, and less optimism about recovery.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness (2020). *5 common myths about suicide debunked*. <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/September-2020/5-Common-Myths-About-Suicide-Debunked>

<sup>5</sup> Walsh, D. A. B., & Foster, J. L. H. (2021). A call to action. A critical review of mental health related anti-stigma campaigns. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 990. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.569539>

## Share stories of lived experiences, particularly men

Many respondents also suggested storytelling as an effective communications strategy, with a particular emphasis on sharing the stories that firearm owners can identify with and stories that demonstrate that mental health concerns can affect anyone. Specifically, respondents suggested sharing stories of men, law enforcement officers, and military members who have overcome suicidal ideation; family members and friends of someone who died by firearm suicide; the potential consequences of unsafe storage; and how a strong understanding of mental health issues helped someone access services.

*[Sharing stories] of veterans from the wars in Afghanistan, Iraqi wars, who have had these experiences and have been treated with PTSD. Granted, it's one mental health concern that is more extreme... But nevertheless, it portrays a group of men who have experienced the vulnerabilities of mental health challenges. The mental health component can be subsumed into traditional models of masculinity.*

*People who have actually gone through it would be helpful, someone who has had suicidal ideation, or a family member, someone with firsthand experience. Or a law enforcement officer who has dealt with mental health issues. And how having guns in the home complicates things.*

*Stories where people were aware of warning signs and a life was saved. And not a sense of dread, but more, this is what I can actually do and watch for, a solutions focused bent toward it.*

*[Stories] make people think... Having family members telling the story of their child who accidentally shot themselves, or a child who took a parent's gun and committed suicide.*

*Framing [stories] so people can understand that [mental health concerns] happen to different people to all different walks of life.*

*Families who have loved ones who commit suicide by firearm, if they could provide some personal stories about it. That might help raise the level of awareness to open up people's eyes to see the connection between gun ownership and firearm. And certainly, there's always human interest stories in the media, things like that. We just had in the last month or so, [person in our community] with a severe drinking problem and couldn't resolve it, highly intelligent, couldn't get beyond the alcoholism and ultimately caused [their] death. If there was a similar situation like that, that could have local media coverage, that could raise awareness and provide an "a-ha" moment.*

*Bring the real life stories, having the courage to say I've had suicidal ideation, this is how I got through it, and I made it through that difficult time. That would be impactful, to break down some of that stigma.*

## **Provide guidance about how to respond to mental health concerns**

Many respondents also identified a need for guidance regarding how to have conversations about mental health, including expressing their concerns about a loved one's mental health and supporting someone who may be experiencing suicidal ideation.

*If I had something like 988, calling to say, this is my situation, [my loved one] is going through this, what can I do to help? How serious do you think this is? Explaining my observations. Having access to that, I think that's bigger than anything.*

*It's a difficult topic, and there's a life on the line. Encourage people to notice the risk signs and also know that you don't need a professional with a PhD to be helpful. So just start the conversation, be supportive, figuring out the rest, not to be afraid to start the conversation even though you're worried that it might make things uncomfortable.*

*A loose framework to have the conversation, a few examples of good supportive statements you could make, questions to ask, to figure out where this person is at. Helping people with prompts that they can lean on to get the conversation started. How to bring it up in a non-threatening and helpful manner, rather than saying you can't do this, this is crazy. People don't like being told they're crazy.*

## **Avoid guilt and focus on empowerment and solutions**

Several respondents emphasized that messaging should avoid guilt and the perception that firearm owners are being told what to do. Instead, respondents suggested framing messaging around solutions and the steps that firearm owners can take to avoid their firearm being used in an unintended way, express their concerns about a loved one's mental health, and prevent suicide.

*Segments on safe gun storage in a positive way, not in a way that is trying to take away guns or control your guns... Keep them away from kids, preventing accidents in the home, maybe not so much suicide. Approach it in a way that says we all have our precious guns, it's a heritage, and we should be storing them properly and protect our loved ones.*

*When it's forced on you. If you say it's mandatory, you need a case, it's forced on you, [we're going to want to] defy what we're told to do. The fight or flight mentality.*

*Looking at it from strengths-based perspective. [Messaging] can't question intelligence, no shaming, no guilt. It doesn't work.*

*In rural areas, we feel like there are egg-headed intellectuals telling us what to do. There's a lot of condescending messaging that goes on.*

*I'm sure there are stories where people were aware of warning signs and a life was saved. And not a sense of dread, but more this is what I can actually do and watch for, a solutions-focused bent toward it.*

*Promote [safe storage] in a positive way. As soon as you try to guilt someone in greater Minnesota into doing something, they will go right against you.*

## Underscore gun rights and avoid the perception of bias

Some respondents emphasized how politicized firearms are, the importance of framing messaging in a way that underscores individuals' rights to own firearms, avoiding messages that could be perceived as advocating for restricting firearm rights, and ensuring messengers are firearm owners themselves.

*The moment someone says not to have guns, it's like no, we don't get to have that conversation. At that moment, we shut down.*

*It almost feels more helpful to start off a sentence by saying we're good with the Second Amendment. Let's just be really clear, it's not about having guns, guns being bad, but we do have a problem here is that men are using guns to commit suicide.*

*So if someone asked why I own guns, [I would say], "I like hunting." So you need one rifle. The moment someone says, "Why do you need all of these?" Well now I need to have the Second Amendment conversation. I have the right.*

*You talk about guns and mental health and people get worked up. They automatically think that guns are connected with suicides, and they ... say that if you say this, you like gun control and you're a liberal. There are linear thoughts that happen, that if you talk about mental health, that means this. It goes down this path, connecting to a lot of things they're against.*

*It has to come from gun owners themselves. There has to be the perception that the person presenting the message that they're respected. If you're communicating to gun owners about mental health, it has to be communicated by gun owners.*

*The term common sense gun laws is widely used in media. And the next thing you'll hear, universal background checks. National registry, stuff like that. Those words will shut down a conversation with most people. Depending on what side you're on, those are all synonymous.*

## Frame firearms as an investment and encourage safe storage to avoid theft

Several respondents suggested framing firearms as an investment or an asset, with some respondents sharing that the possibility of theft may be a powerful argument to encourage safe storage. Additionally, several respondents noted that firearm owners are generally more concerned about firearm theft than their firearm potentially being used in a suicide attempt.

*Protect your investment... If I walked into a gun shop, to buy ammo or something, and you saw a sign. Let's talk about a really expensive depth finder, and you saw a dad and kids, and it says protect your investment, you might consider storage, like a lock or something for a depth finder. For guns, it would be a gun lock, gun safe, trigger lock. Protect your investment. Your investment is this piece of equipment, and it could be handed down to your kids.*

*Gun owners are more worried that, someone will get in and take my weapon and they'll use it in attempted robbery or a murder and that traces that back to me. They aren't thinking that their gun would be used in a suicide.*

## Emphasize that there are many options for safe storage

Several respondents suggested sharing different options for safe storage, noting that storage often looks different depending on multiple factors, such as the age of household members, the amount of money the firearm owner has available to spend on safe storage, and how the owner uses the firearm (e.g., self-defense, protecting livestock). Some described how sharing storage options may help avoid the perception that firearm owners are being told what to do.

*You can have a safe place that's locked, keep your ammunition away in a separate location. What's a halfway? If you don't have a locked gun cabinet, can you say, just don't store ammunition with it? Two separate locations. If you can't afford a safe, just make sure it's separate*

*There are so many different types of safe storage. Gun shops, Scheel's, Cabella's, they could have an area where they're promoting safe storage, the gun cases, trigger locks.*

*Anything that puts a barrier between someone to just immediately take action. If you're one that wants to store it under your bed, might be a case with a gun lock. Ammunition might be separate from wherever it is. If you have an open gun case for display, might not be a lock. But maybe take out the firing bolt.*

*Even having a room with a good door and locks is better than nothing.*

*It's not a good thing to have that weapon in the nightstand, so if you need to feel safe, putting it up high, in a locked box... And I know people will say, "Oh, God. Perfectly safe is throwing them in the river." But when you bring that up, now the opportunity completely goes away. People aren't going to do that. You're swimming upstream on the culture. It's not about getting rid of them.*

*Any amount of safety is better than none... If I had an elevator speech, focus on trying to get "more safe."*

## Intervening during a crisis

Respondents were asked to share how they and other firearm owners would respond if a loved one was experiencing a crisis and had easy access to firearms.

### Steps respondents would take to respond to a loved one's mental health crisis

#### Conversations with their loved one

Having a conversation with the person experiencing the crisis was the most commonly reported step, with some sharing that it would depend on each person, their loved one, and their relationship.

*The route I would go is talking with them, or someone close to them probably. Because that's one of the biggest things I've heard in [previous mental health] training, is you should talk to people experiencing those things. There's the myth that if you talk about it it will make them think about it more. Talking is a good idea.*

*It depends on your relationship with that person, if you felt like you could reason with them and felt close to them, you could voice your concerns. If you felt like they would be hostile or agitated, or might act on their emotions just because you tried to intervene, then boy you'd have to figure out who it would be they would be comfortable talking to. A friend, clergy, community person, another family member. In your own family, you have people you can communicate better with than others, and some people just take things better.*

## **Temporary firearm removal or storage**

While respondents varied regarding whether they would take any steps specific to their loved one's firearms, they most often reported that they would at least ask about securing them during the crisis.

*If they had firearms, I would do a lot of talking to get those guns from them, ammo. Let's just hang on to these for a little while... I just don't think in your state right now. With things heavy on your mind, probably best if I just hang on to these until we find a person to talk to about these issues.*

*Having been through [a similar situation] not that long ago, the first step was removing the firearms and other agents of harm they had access to.*

Some respondents said they weren't sure if they would, or that it depends on certain factors, including whether they thought the person would react negatively and how close they feel to the person. Additionally, some respondents reported they and/or other firearm owners would not ask about the person's firearms at all.

*[I] Probably [would] not ask about their firearms. I'm not an expert, but in the sense that if someone is having suicidal thoughts and are serious about it, there are lots of different tools out there they could use.*

*I would probably try to comfort them, talk about what it could take to get from where they are to where they want to be, what kind of help they want. But it really depends who they are, and how close I am.*

## **Connect loved one with mental health services**

Some respondents shared that they would try to connect their loved one with mental health services.

*[In a recent similar situation], we got them connected to a mental health provider, a therapist... Letting them know there is help available and we care and want them to feel well supported. They're not going through this alone, don't need to feel isolated or that they have to cope on their own. Trying to pull together a network of support and find different avenues or services that hopefully they will be comfortable engaging with.*

*I wouldn't hesitate to have that conversation to refer them to a medical facility, have an intervention and contact professionals on their behalf, because it's such a senseless and wasteful thing.*

## Contact law enforcement or emergency services

Some respondents also shared they would contact law enforcement or emergency services, but they also shared they would only do so in certain situations, including if their loved one was uncooperative or if they didn't know the person very well.

*If it was someone I wasn't close with, I would push that off to local law enforcement, sheriff, EMS.*

*If they weren't cooperative, talking to law enforcement about doing a seizure, removal, court ordered removal. I know there have been marriage disputes, domestics, where the police came and took weapons from the house.*

## Intervention challenges

Respondents identified several challenges regarding intervening in a mental health crisis.

### Discomfort with talking about mental health and the connection between suicide and firearm access

Several respondents described how discussing mental health, suicide, and/or limiting firearm access, even temporarily, can be uncomfortable.

*If you're able to have those discussions, that's helpful. But if it's not the type of relationship, especially with men, and stoic and stereotypical dudes, they don't talk a lot.*

*Just awkwardness, not knowing how to talk about it. Uncertainty with how to deal with it.*

*Most wouldn't do anything because they wouldn't be comfortable. I think the short answer is that they're not comfortable, so intervening isn't an option.*

*That's American culture, we don't like talking about death even though it's part of the life cycle. We fear it.*

*A lot of people seem threatened about any discussion of guns regardless of the issue... [The firearm owners that I know], if there was a mental health crisis in one of their relatives, and there was a gun in the home, I think they would be open to trying to intervene. But I don't see them taking drastic measures to get guns out of the home.*

*I think it would be difficult, complicated... [Taking away someone's firearms] would be like taking away a driver's license from your parents. That would be very triggering for some people. You have to be careful with how you approach it.*

*Fear of that person no longer loving them. Generally it's a family member who sees the issue, but they're afraid to say something because they don't want that person to end up hating them. Personally, I think that's the biggest thing holding people back.*

*Anyone who has had a family member with mental health challenges or crisis, they're more willing to talk about it. If you haven't had personal contact, it's still perceived as a sign of weakness, a character flaw.*

## **Lack of understanding regarding warning signs and a reluctance to acknowledge suicide could happen**

Several respondents described challenges related to identifying when someone may be experiencing mental health concerns and a general reluctance to acknowledge that their loved one might attempt suicide.

*Certainly, you're aware of suicide happening around you, and knowing people who have committed suicide but when it's a close personal friend or family member, it becomes much more of a reality. It's an eye opening experience... Unless you're professionally trained, you don't understand how that can happen.*

*You hear a lot of people who commit suicide who you didn't even know. You didn't realize they were in that bad of shape. It's not always black and white. It's not always obvious what they're going through... Most people, if you don't live with them, there's a lot going on that you don't see.*

*Just recognizing suicidal tendencies, that it's possible they might try suicide. My opinion, or your opinion, might be that it's not an option, but you don't know it's an option for them... Once you really recognize that this person is suicidal, it would be easier. If you didn't know that he was suicidal, you would think you would be overstepping your bounds. You would just think, he's fine, just going through tough times.*

## **Desire to respect people's autonomy and loved one's potential reluctance to admit mental health concerns**

Some respondents described wanting to avoid infringing on people's independence and autonomy, emphasizing that they can't force someone experiencing mental health concerns to take certain steps, including accessing mental health services or storing firearms elsewhere temporarily.

*There's this huge factor of independence. My independence is very important. And there's fear of offending the person. If the person isolates themselves, it's their choice.*

*If a person has a mental issue, that person needs help, they need to see that they need help, it's not that there's something wrong with them. Just like an alcoholic. And ultimately, it's up to them, the first step is to admit you have a problem.*

*Treading on an individual's rights, especially in northern Minnesota, becomes a tricky subject to deal with. I'm a gun owner, but I'm not as avid as the rest of my family. Those individuals in my family, would almost take offense that you would even want to consider doing that.*

# Safe storage

## Definitions of safe storage

Respondents were asked to share how they and other firearm owners define safe storage.

### Safes and locks

Respondents most frequently described locking firearms, including using locked safes, vaults, cases, and cabinets, as well as trigger locks.

*I think safe storage means weapons are in a secure situation, either with a trigger lock or in a locked case.*

*Locked up, someplace where they can't get at it and have easy access. Safest way is a biometric safe. Touch it and in a fraction of a second have access.*

*Lock the gun cabinet... Friends of mine, who are hunters have locked gun cabinets. I know there are trigger locks you can install on firearms.*

*I have a big, giant gun safe. I also tell [firearm training] students, if people want to have a gun on their nightstand in their bedroom, get a lock box with a key, or one with the biometrics. Don't lay it on your nightstand.*

### Safe storage practices vary widely, and they are situational

Respondents also frequently shared that safe storage methods vary between firearm owners and their situation. They shared that methods vary by cost, from large and expensive firearm vaults to inexpensive trigger locks, and they vary by context, from firearm owners who live alone and thus may have fewer concerns about their firearm being used in an unintended way, to firearm owners with young children who may need to take extensive steps to securing their firearms. Respondents also described how some firearm owners do not engage in any method of safe storage and/or explicitly oppose the idea of safe storage.

*There's safe storage for kids, and safe storage for other people. If they're my guns, and know where the shells are and the gun is, I see it more as making sure I don't accidentally discharge the weapon... And keeping [ammo] separate. But that's subjective. For me, it's the gun in one place, and shells five feet away. If you have a kid, that's different.*

*I have family members who are serious weapon owners, 15, 20, even 50. They take them very seriously, because of the investment. They consider it a collection... They have the big safes. They have thousands of dollars invested.. But I know others where you'd find a shotgun behind a truck seat and ammunition in the glovebox.*

*If I had to guess, I would say, in rural Minnesota, I would say at best would be 50/50 around locked away or on display in a gun cabinet or case. Ammo below and guns above, wide open. That's how it was when I was a kid. I think that's still probably happening. Out on farms especially.*

*It will vary. Based on thought processes around the Second Amendment. Military people, my finger isn't on the trigger, so it's safely stored. Other people, 100% locked case, cabinet, safe, with a gun lock. I just think about everyone's safe storage is different.*

## Preventing unintended access and use

Some respondents shared definitions that focus on preventing the firearm being accessed and/or used by someone who the firearm owner did not intend to access and/or use the firearm.

*I suppose I would define it as stored in a place where people who shouldn't have access don't have access.*

*For other responsible firearm owners, I think it's the same. It's got to be locked away and out of sight and mind of kids for sure. A limited number of people knowing how to access them*

## Unloaded, inoperable, and/or storing ammunition separately

Safe storage definitions also included ensuring firearms are unloaded and/or are inoperable, including storing and/or locking ammunition separately from firearms.

*Ammunition is in a separate location, preferably locked as well. That's the typical situation, but it doesn't mean it's unusual for it to be in another location. Typically firearm and ammunition are not together, certainly not loaded.*

*If we can do nothing more than [get firearm owners to] separate ammo from the guns, and get them out of the sidetables.*

*Firearm that is inoperable, can't be used. Unloaded, trigger guards, ammo stored separately and secured.*

## Barriers to safe storage

Respondents were asked to identify the barriers that prevent firearm owners from practicing safe storage.

### Lack of experience or understanding regarding the risks of firearms or unsafe storage

Respondents most often described a lack of experience or understanding of the risks related to unsafe storage, including suicide and theft. Most respondents also agreed that firearm owners are generally not thinking about the connection between suicide and firearm access. Additionally, some firearm owners identified the contradiction between preventing suicide among firearm owners through safe storage, as firearm owners are aware of where their firearms are stored and how to access them.

*Ignorance or mis-training about how to handle firearms.*

*Naivety, they don't think it's going to happen to them.*

*A common view of a lot of people I know, is that it's a tool. You're not going to think about your hammer or saw as something that would be used for suicide.*

*[Lack of] education and not thinking about it, as a new gun owner, or new to it or young or never have been around firearms. It's just not something you're thinking about. There's a lack of education about what safe storage is and the purpose.*

*Lack of firsthand experience. If you haven't had a friend or family member who have attempted suicide, you might be naïve to the fact that someone would actually do that. I had a neighbor, [redacted], avid hunter, outdoorsman, loved having his firearms and hunting. One day we couldn't find him, and [redacted] he had committed suicide with a shotgun. I was in middle or high school, and you realize that firearms can be used for suicide. If you've never had that experience, you might just think that will never happen to me, that it's not possible that one of your family members have that degree of illness, and that they would use a weapon to kill themselves.*

*[My firearm being used in a suicide attempt] is not something I ever really considered. I'm more concerned about poisons in your house, and someone having access to that, accidental things like that.*

*I was a big fan of thinking that no one will break in, I hid guns all around the house, and wasn't worried because I trained my kids on guns. But I was gone one day, and someone broke in and stole them. Early on I learned a valuable lesson.*

Additionally, throughout the interviews, several respondents either shared that some firearm owners are reluctant to acknowledge the connection between suicide and easy access to firearms; or expressed the idea that someone who wants to attempt suicide ultimately will, even without easy access to a firearm. This may indicate a need to improve understanding of how risk increases with easier access.

*There are owners who would be very offended by the suggestion that gun ownership and suicide are related. Most of the people I know are fairly reasonable. That they can understand the relationship, and understand that someone in crisis, if there's a firearm, that will be much more dangerous than if there wasn't. I think some firearm owners are so entrenched and so anti-everything, they are pro-gun first and foremost.*

*If somebody wants to [attempt suicide], they will do it. And firearms are used most commonly because they're most expedient. People use lots of other methods. Eliminating one method isn't going to eliminate the act.*

*I don't know what makes it a firearms issue in particular. There's lots of different ways to kill yourself.*

*If someone is determined to do it, they can get in their car and take it into their own hands, so to speak. Wouldn't they just move to another means?*

## **Cost**

Cost was also identified as a barrier, with several respondents noting how expensive firearm safes can be.

*Cost is one barrier. I think of some folks who own firearms whose socioeconomic level isn't high enough to purchase a safe or other secure method.*

*Probably for some people, cost. Gun safes are not cheap. Probably for most, cost is the biggest barrier.*

*Expense. A good gun vault of medium size is a thousand dollars. A big one, a real good one, you can buy a car with that money.*

## **Convenience and need for immediate access**

Respondents shared that some firearm owners want to have easy access to their firearms for multiple reasons, including self-defense, protecting livestock or controlling pests, or just a general desire for convenience.

*It's inconvenient. Growing up, I lived out in the country, dad was an avid hunter. I think the convenience is a thing. My dad would just grab the gun and go. We had chickens, and we would use the shotgun for predators. It was just behind our front door, right in the corner. Easy access if you need it for whatever purpose... [Some owners] live on farms, own livestock, there's a lot of money tied up in those animals. And if there's a predator, you gotta go out there and take care of them.*

*People think about self-defense. A lot of people are concerned about self-defense, if something bad is happening, bump in the night, I need to be able to access my gun. So they might leave loaded firearms in nightstands.*

*In a rural community on a farm, it might be grab the shotgun to blast a pigeon because it's there. I think there's part of rural America that does it for pest control.*

*We all have fears. Someone break in and may not protect my family. Huge motivator. It's such a remote possibility yet it is a big factor.*

*You're always going to run into people that say, "I need to remain tactical, I don't want any barriers." Fully charged, ready to go, on my hip.*

## **Habit, norms, and complacency**

Respondents also identified habits, norms, and complacency as barriers to safe storage, and they emphasized the need to change safe storage norms.

*It's a habit. They've never had to think about locking it up. It's tradition, always been done that way. They're not thinking about it as an issue. Their mental health is good so why would they lock it away?*

*Certain people could be more mindful about their weapons. Most of my friends who I hunt with are cognizant of that. Like how they communicate gun use to their kids, how they treat guns, and thinking about where they're stored. More the culture I grew up in is less mindful, less mindful use of firearms.*

*It's a way of life for some people. They grew up with them, shooting, hunting, they think they are very safe and maybe they aren't but they don't know the difference unless they had the proper education, and that's how they were raised.*

*Some of it is probably a comfort level, this is my house, I have no intention of hurting others, so we're good. Maybe an overconfidence. I know the defensive response will be, of the 1,000 people who have guns stored unsafely, if 2 or 3 or 10 lead to a violent suicide, that's not the reason why the other 900 need to lock them up differently. It's kind of a crappy argument, but that seems to be the argument.*

*But some people just get lazy when it comes to gun storage. I'll put it here, forget where they put it, completely stupid. And you'll hear about these accidents, where a person had a gun laying somewhere, someone found it, with great power comes great responsibility. That gun owner has to be responsible and diligent in storing their gun safely. Neighbor comes over, finds a gun, all of a sudden someone gets hurt... People get complacent.*

## Space

Lack of physical space to store firearms was also identified as a barrier by some respondents.

*[Not having enough] physical space, in your home, your office, wherever, to put things.  
Space could be an issue depending on where you live, the size of your house.*

## Solutions to safe storage barriers

In addition to the communications-specific suggestions included earlier in this report, respondents suggested strategies to address safe storage barriers.

### Provide free safety equipment or subsidize the cost of equipment

Respondents suggested providing free safety equipment and/or providing funding to firearm owners to subsidize the cost of equipment.

*Sportsmen's clubs could provide grant funding, free gun safes.  
The local conservation club gives away free trigger guards. At the county fair, they have a booth, and they give out cables with a key to go through the long guns, and trigger guards for the pistols. They have pulltabs, and that's one of the things they buy with the funds.  
The Veteran's Administration, if you are a vet, the VA will give you a free lock. The county I live in, you can go to the office and get a free lock. I always tell my students, when you top off your permit, ask if they have a lock program.*

### Provide more opportunities for firearm education

Several respondents described a need for more firearm education and promoting training opportunities.

*Education, promoting classes... One of the greatest things for firearm handling has been the firearm safety training classes... And since those classes have become mandatory, firearm accidents have declined by like 85% or something. That certainly has had an effect. You can't get a hunting license until you've taken that firearm safety class that most kids take when they're 12 years old. And maybe firearm training classes should be mandatory for anyone. Maybe there should be some kind of basic firearm safety training in our schools.*

## Incentive programs

Some respondents suggested creating incentive programs, such as tax credits or providing one-on-one assistance with developing a safe storage system.

*Tax credit for proof of purchase of gun safe. Government can do all sorts of things that way to provide some incentive.*

*Incentive program. [You could] have the police department or Pheasants Forever, just like Excel Energy does, come and inspect your home, here are some tips to save your money, free lightbulbs, stuff for your door. Getting some legislative funding to support people within communities, come out and help people, you get X, Y, Z or a tax break.*

## Terminology

Respondents were also asked to share their reactions to two terms often used in firearm safety and suicide prevention: “responsible gun ownership” and “time and space.”

### Reactions to “responsible gun ownership”

Respondents most often reported a positive reaction to the term “responsible gun ownership.” Specifically, they described how this term doesn’t focus on limiting firearm access, portrays firearm ownership as valid, and seems neutral or non-threatening.

*I think that’s a great term for multiple reasons. It’s one that, for those who are sensitive to their rights to own guns and operate guns, would be more receptive to. We’re not talking about minimizing access to guns, or your ownership of guns, it’s being responsible for the ones you have. To drive a car, you have to pass a test and have insurance for you to be a responsible car owner. Guns could use the same language.*

*I think that’s an important frame for the larger conversation about firearms in general. For this conversation and more broadly too. I come from a monolithically firearm enthusiastic family and have had a lot of conversations with them about private gun ownership, and if those rights are ever significantly eroded in America, it won’t be because politicians want to be mean, but it will be because the public gets tired of people dying of firearms, especially young people, and people can access them too easily. Especially Second Amendment hardliners, encouraging them to be more responsible with their firearms. That gives them the best chance to get the policy outcomes they want.*

However, some respondents identified concerns with the term, including that it’s subjective, it could still be perceived as telling firearm owners what to do, and that most firearm owners already view themselves as responsible owners.

*Responsible and safe ownership, I suppose a person could take the opposite perspective – are you calling me irresponsible or unsafe? People these days are so easily offended, so it’s hard to know. I would like to think that people are generally intelligent enough to know that the phraseology does not mean that the opposite is true of yourself.*

*It needs to be defined. We can have all these phrases, people don't know what they mean. What is the definition. It could be my finger is not on the trigger, I'm responsible. Defining what, as a gun owner group, what is a responsible gun owner.*

*When I hear that phrase, it's like someone is trying to guilt me into something... It is a good phrase, but it's like propaganda. If you're not doing that, you're irresponsible. I'm one of those who doesn't like to be told what to do.*

## Reactions to “time and space”

Respondents also generally responded positively to the term “time and space.” They shared that it still conveys the idea that the firearm is still theirs, it is a neutral term, and that it is simple and easy to understand.

*Time and space is more neutral [than responsible gun ownership]. And it makes sense, making sure there are enough space between objects to ward off a tragedy. For some people, that's more neutral.*

*I've heard the phrase before, and it's really the path we followed when we encountered this in my family. Removing access, and engaging in a conversation to redirect thinking about it. I think that makes sense to me.*

*Perfect, just what we talked about [during the entirety of the interview]. The time between picking it up and using it is super short. Takes more time and space with other means. Same basic principle, if you can give yourself some time, the good part of you will come forward.*

*Of all the things I've heard, I really like time and space. Short, quick, easy to understand, makes people stop and think. It's all it takes.*

However, some respondents also expressed concern about this term. They shared that it may still be viewed as restricting access, and that it may not resonate as well with firearm owners who may be less familiar or have fewer concerns about mental health.

*Depending on people's particular beliefs about gun ownerships, I could see, if not communicated well, that someone in the gun owning community will say, this is the angle they're going to use to take away my guns. They're going to use a mental health approach, you can't own guns because the high risk of suicide with guns... Any messaging that is about restricting gun access for the ...purposes of suicide prevention, I think that would be met with resistance.*

*I can see the point in it, because it's trying to prevent an impulse... I think it's hard for me to completely assess that, because I haven't had those impulses before... The phrase isn't something that resonates with me, because I haven't had those impulses.*

## Miscellaneous themes

### **Traditional ideas about masculinity are a challenge to addressing mental health concerns**

Several respondents identified challenges related to traditional views of masculinity, including that many men are often reluctant to seek help and to discuss or acknowledge their emotions and/or mental health.

*As much as I would love to say put flyers on every bulletin board, quite honestly, if they do read it, it's not going to strike them hard enough to step forward [for] most men. It boils down to the mentality of the male. The thought process is that if I ask for help or call somebody, that's a sign of weakness, especially if I don't know them. It's taboo. As a man, 63 years old, I've seen it a lot. The people who need it are often the ones who are least likely to ask for it.*

*[Something that was] very well stated by some of the students in my school: If you have a problem, just be a man and push everything aside and compartmentalize and put it away... I try to have a lot of introspection [in the classes I teach], not a lot of students get the chance to do that. A young gentleman said that you push it to the side, and if that's the predominant view, then they're not going to accept the idea that suicidal thoughts is a thing because it's viewed as a weakness. And a lot of the manly man stuff doesn't work with that.*

*A lot of men are macho and don't want to admit any type of health issue, whether mental or physical. We got to get around that somehow... There are a lot of men who just think that's a weakness, and mental health issues in particular are even more so.*

*I will say, in men more so for some reason, you find them seeking help within themselves. Seeking help from someone else would be deemed a weakness. When they're weakest, they won't ask for it.*

### **The firearm-owning community is heterogeneous**

Several respondents emphasized that the firearm-owning community is heterogeneous, with a wide range of beliefs and preferences, and that it is important to consider these differences and avoid relying on one universal messaging strategy.

*You've got a couple different types [of firearm owners]. They own a firearm, maybe a shotgun because they hunt in the fall or used to hunt or it was handed down from a dad. Something they have, but not necessarily passionate about. And then you have the firearm owners who have permits to carry, it's a daily ritual, shoot on a daily basis, and if you talk about taking their firearms, you've gotten them upset. They're real Second Amendment people.*

*There is no singular culture around this. We have highly educated doctors and dentists with rifles in their closets because they like to hunt. We have goofy rednecks that are convinced society will collapse at any moment and need to run to their bunkers and protect their five pounds of peanut butter. The only thing that ties us together is owning guns... One singular message won't work.*

*Northern Minnesota has its own culture... You can't do a one size fits all, you have to understand what the culture is.*

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### ***There are unique challenges in greater Minnesota***

Throughout the interviews, respondents identified several unique challenges that exist in greater Minnesota, including:

- Isolation and lack of social support are common issues in greater Minnesota.
- Smaller communities may offer greater opportunities for identifying mental health concerns, as people often know most of their community members. Similarly, word of mouth may be particularly important for communities in greater Minnesota.
- Many people in greater Minnesota work in agriculture, and mental health concerns may be particularly common within these fields.
- There is a lack of mental health resources in greater Minnesota, and there is limited awareness of available resources.

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451 Lexington Parkway North  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700 | [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)

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