

VA Firearm Policy Got It Half Right

To the Editor: September is National Suicide Prevention and Awareness month. In 2021, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention marked the month by demonstrating why it is the national visionary when it comes to preventing suicide. The office rolled out several public service announcements (PSAs) about creating “space between thought and trigger.”¹ These incredibly sensitive spots, the first of their kind, encourage safer storage and reduced access to firearms at points of heightened crises. The PSAs are timely, especially given the just released annual report showing that 69.2% of veteran suicide deaths are by firearm.² Wide PSA dissemination is vital.

But concerningly, the PSAs completely missed the importance of critical partnerships. As described in *Federal Practitioner* 2 years ago, VA forged a groundbreaking collaboration with the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), the firearms industry trade association, and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP).³ Having NSSF as a partner advanced VA’s effort to ensure that lethal means safety counseling is culturally relevant, comes from a trusted source, and contains no antifirearm bias. Since then, VA and NSSF cobranded billboards in 8 states, encouraging storing firearms responsibly to prevent suicide. They collectively developed an educational, training, and resource toolkit that guides communities through the process of building coalitions to raise awareness about securely storing firearms when not in use.⁴ VA and NSSF have cross-listed safe storage websites.

In May 2020, the VA cosponsored a COVID-19 suicide prevention video with the NSSF, AFSP, and the US Concealed Carry Association, including ways that the firearm industry, gun owners, and their families can help.⁵

Yet when the VA launched its PSA campaign last month, NSSF’s name was conspicuously absent. That must be corrected going forward. Reaching vulnerable veterans who own firearms requires partnerships with individuals and groups who own firearms. Going it alone undercuts the essence of what VA has worked so hard to achieve in the past few years.

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