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## **The Safe Storage Campaign**

### **A Program of the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center Seattle, Washington**

In 1997 the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center convened a coalition of health, public safety, education and community organizations to address the problem of easy access to handguns by children and adolescents. Unsecured firearms in the home, particularly handguns, are a significant risk for unintentional injuries and deaths, suicide, and gun theft. This coalition has formed the basis of the Safe Storage Campaign.

The Safe Storage Campaign is focused on promoting the sale and use of a handgun lockbox. The lockbox is a steel box, about the size of a large shoebox, with a hinged lid. The box is locked with a push button combination lock. Opening the box requires that the operator know the proper sequential combination. There are no numbers to align, and it can be opened in the dark. The chances of guessing the combination are estimated to be 1 in 10,000. The goal is to reduce access to handguns by those for whom they are not intended. In so doing, we hope to reduce access to handguns and in so doing reduce youth gun violence, adolescent suicide, gun theft, and unintentional shootings.

#### **The Coalition**

The Safe Storage coalition consists of organizations and individuals that can help us to reach our target audience—gun owners—with a safe storage message. We have included law enforcement agencies, health providers, community clinics, religious organizations, school districts, and hospitals. *We purposely did not include any organization with an existing political profile, either pro or con, on firearm issues.* To do so would undermine the neutrality of this campaign. This is a public health campaign, similar to our efforts to promote smoke detectors and bicycle helmets.

Handgun owners who participated in focus groups indicated that police officers are extremely credible gun safety authorities. They have knowledge of firearms and firearm safety, and are not perceived as a threat to gun ownership. When possible, we utilize law enforcement agencies as often as possible in promoting safe storage.

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### **Target audience**

Of particular concern to us was the gun owner who owned a handgun for self-protection. These weapons are very often left loaded and readily available in the home should there be a sudden and urgent need. While the rationale for such a need is debatable, there are many that believe firearm availability is critical to personal safety, regardless of the evidence to the contrary.

Our target audience was not likely to be what one might consider a “gun hobbyist,” but rather someone who may not be particularly experienced with firearms. Gun enthusiasts tend to have considerable training and information about gun safety, and would not likely be swayed by a health communication campaign. In addition, we were particularly concerned about gun owners with children in the home or in homes where children were frequent visitors.

### **Materials**

The campaign developed a television public service announcement, a poster, brochure, and fact sheet. All the materials informed the audience of the risk of unsecured handguns, and used the slogan “Buy a box for your gun, not for your kid.” The materials also promoted a hotline number from which callers could get information about firearm safety, and a coupon for \$10 off the price of a lockbox at Fred Meyer stores.

### **Retail partner**

A critical component of this campaign is the partnership with Fred Meyer stores. Fred Meyer is a large department store chain, with stores throughout the Pacific Northwest. They agreed to stock lockboxes and sell them at cost, as well as print and provide coupons. Because lockboxes are typically only available in gun shops and through mail order houses, it was critical to get these boxes in to stores that have a much larger customer base. The boxes are currently being carried in the sporting goods section of Fred Meyer stores.

### **Why a lockbox?**

There are few gun storage or safety devices readily on the market. The trigger lock has perhaps been the most often cited safety device. However, we found that the trigger lock, which has been readily available for many years, has many drawbacks to gun owners. First and foremost, for a trigger lock to be effective, the key has to be stored in a separate location which is a barrier to quick access. Trigger locks with a numerical, rotary combination lock cannot be unlocked in the dark. Secondly, many gun owners we talked

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to felt that trigger locks did not fit all types of firearms, particularly handguns, properly. This meant that despite the trigger lock, the gun could still be discharged. Finally, trigger locks have been widely available for many years and are relatively inexpensive. Despite this, they remain unpopular with handgun owners.

Another device is the gun “safe.” Gun safes are essentially vaults for storing multiple weapons, both handguns and long guns. These do not have quick access features, and tend to be large in size making them unwelcome in a bedroom, closet or similar confined location.

The lockbox meets the need for quick access and safe storage. When the lockbox has been presented with other devices to gun owners participating in focus groups the lockbox has been a very popular item. Participants indicated a strong willingness to purchase and use a lockbox; however, many had never seen one before.

The lockbox currently offered by Fred Meyer is made by the Cannon Corporation of New Jersey. The cost of the box is \$79.99, which is significantly cheaper than those found in gun shops and mail order (note: we do not have any financial interest in this company or any of it’s products).

### **The pilot campaign**

From February to August of 1997, the Safe Storage campaign was implemented in the Puget Sound region of Washington State. During that time period the television public service announcement was given relatively good play on two local stations. In addition, materials and coupons were sent to all area pediatricians, family physicians, and psychiatrists. Crime prevention and community policing programs in local police departments also received materials. Other members of the coalition distributed materials through church publications, community clinics, and parent-teacher associations. In seven months Fred Meyer sold over 1000 lockboxes.

### **Current status of the safe storage campaign**

The campaign has won considerable praise from gun owners and non-gun owners alike. The United States Justice Department has identified it as a program of merit. Despite this, we have had little success in getting either public or private agencies to provide funding or support. Some feel the issue is too controversial, others feel we should use

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our position to call for more political solutions. Finding funding to maintain this program has been a challenge.

In the fall of 1999 we will be airing radio commercials and making a concerted effort to promote lockboxes with substantial assistance from the Pierce County (Tacoma) Health Department which has seen the considerable merits of such a program. We hope to secure funding to air our radio commercials on and off for one year. In addition, we will be purchasing advertising space in small weekly newspapers and in trade publications such as Fishing and Hunting News.

**Evaluation**

As with any public health intervention it is imperative to ask the question, does this really work? We are in the process of evaluating this program by conducting a phone survey in our area of gun owners and their gun storage practices. We will also conduct the survey in 6 other control cities in the western United States to see if our campaign has altered gun storage practices. The baseline survey has been conducted and the follow-up will take place some time in 2000.

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### **Planning a Safe Storage Campaign?**

Based on our experience, here are some of the critical steps:

1. Find a major retailer willing to sell lockboxes. If you promote safe storage you need to direct people where they can go to get the boxes and it needs to be a convenient, well known place. A large chain is the best because people tend to know where they are and will have multiple reasons for going to that store. Also, try and get the retailer to sell them at cost. There is a price point at which gun owners in our focus group said they would not exceed, about \$80.00 for a lockbox. They can also track the sales of the boxes to give you a gauge of how well you are doing. Include them in your coalition.
2. Get law enforcement as involved as possible in promoting, endorsing, etc.
3. Local government can and should get behind this effort. Many government agencies promote the use of lifejackets and smoke detectors, they should do the same with lockboxes.
4. The media is interested in this topic. We found that having family members of victims of unintentional shooting were eager to talk with the media about the importance of safe storage.

We hope this has been somewhat helpful to you. Our effort is a work in progress, but we hope that the social norm will evolve to a point that safe storage is not just a unique concept but widespread practice.

If you have any questions or ideas, please feel free to contact Evan Simpson at [evansim@u.washington.edu](mailto:evansim@u.washington.edu), or call 206-521-1526.