



VA | U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

MINUTES MATTER

OPTIONS FOR SECURE FIREARM STORAGE



Clinician Guide



Joseph Boffa, Ph.D. | Claire Houtsma, Ph.D. | Dustin Seidler, Ph.D.



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About This Product

Why should I use this product?

Many people in the United States own firearms, particularly Veterans. Most firearm owners store their firearms in the home. Firearms are often stored unsecured, such as in an unlocked location, and loaded. Sometimes easy access to a firearm may pose a risk to a Veteran or others in their home. For example, if a Veteran is having thoughts of suicide, easy access to a loaded firearm can increase risk for suicide. In such circumstances, minutes matter. Increasing the time and distance between the person at risk and the firearm, even temporarily, can save a life. This guide and the accompanying tool are designed to help clinician have conversation about secure firearm storage, and develop a Secure Storage Plan that Veteran can use to make changes to their firearm storage. The guide also includes information about how to use firearm cable locks on various types of firearms.

Who should use the Clinician Guide?

Any clinician working with a firearm owner can refer to the Clinician Guide. If you have experience with firearm basics and lethal means safety counseling for firearms, you may elect to review the Secure Storage Plan for immediate use with Veterans. You can complete the full plan with the Veteran or use it as a reference guide for yourself when discussing firearm storage.

What information can I find in the Clinician Guide?

The Clinician Guide includes basic information about firearms so that those with minimal or no firearm experience can familiarize themselves with important terms. There are tips for having a conversation about secure storage practices, as well as for encouraging change to storage practices for Veterans who may consider doing so. The Clinician Guide will help you effectively develop a Secure Storage Plan with Veteran firearm owner (see below for more information).

What information can I find about developing a Secure Storage Plan?

In addition to instructions for using the **Secure Storage Plan** (Page 12), there are firearm injury prevention data that support secure storage practices. The plan emphasizes 1) places where firearms may be stored and 2) additional measures to enhance storage practices.

How should I discuss the Secure Storage Plan?

Good rapport is essential to honest conversations about firearms. You may discuss this when a Veteran has disclosed they have access to a firearm. It's critical to assess firearm access when suicidality, homicidality, or interpersonal violence is reported by the Veteran or another person in the home. Always address concerns with the Veteran in the appointment before they leave.

How much time is needed to develop a Secure Storage Plan?

In situations in which firearm owners are ready and willing to make changes to storing a single firearm, developing a plan may take less than five minutes. In situations in which suicide risk is a concern and comprehensive action is warranted, it may take longer to establish a plan for secure storage.

What if I have additional questions about firearms and secure storage?

The **Resources** section at the end of this product includes links to more in-depth firearm education, places to search for storage options and out-of-home storage locators.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, get help now. Crisis line responders are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Don't wait, make the call. Your life and the life of others may depend on it.

Veterans Crisis Line: Dial 988 then Press 1.



Firearms 101

There is much to know about the culture of firearms, the people who own them, and their reasons for use. Regardless of your knowledge base, you can successfully develop a secure storage plan with Veterans. This section explains the basics of different firearms. These details will help you talk to Veterans about the different types of firearms they own, what kind of ammunition they may be storing, how a cable lock can help secure each type of firearm, and additional locking options for different types and sizes of firearms. The **Resources** section of this guide has more information about where to purchase locking devices, estimated costs, and how to install cable locks on different firearms.

Handgun Basics

Handguns are small and easy to conceal. They are often used for home or self-defense. Handguns are the most common type of firearm used in suicides. There are two main types of handguns:



REVOLVERS

Mechanics: Revolvers fire one round of ammunition at a time. You may just pull the trigger (single-action) or first need to cock the hammer (double-action) to fire.

Ammunition: Typically, six rounds are stored in a rotating cylinder. After firing, the cylinder turns to load another round.

Using a Cable Lock for Secure Storage: Thread cable through the cylinder and/or empty barrel.



PISTOLS

Mechanics: Semi-automatic pistols fire one round or “cartridge” at a time by pulling the trigger. This type of firearm may be referred to by its cartridge size or manufacturer name (ex: 22, Glock)

Ammunition: A magazine of 8 to 19 cartridges loads into the bottom of the grip. After firing, a round is ejected from a port on top of the gun. The next cartridge loads automatically.

Using a Cable Lock for Secure Storage: Thread cable through the ejection port and empty magazine well.

Storage Cases:

Hand guns are easy to store in small lock boxes, safes, and gun cabinets.



\$10 - \$350



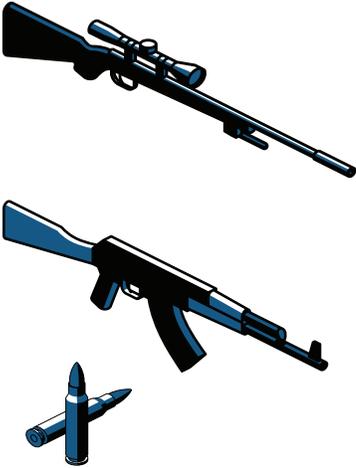
\$50 - \$450



\$200 - \$2,500

Long Gun Basics

Long guns include rifles and shotguns. All are designed for accurately shooting targets much further away than you could with a handgun. Most are used for hunting and sport shooting. Most military-only infantry rifles are “selective fire,” meaning they can switch between semi- and fully automatic fire. Although used less frequently than handguns, long guns are used in suicides.



RIFLES

Mechanics: Single shot, bolt, lever, and pump action rifles need a cartridge put in the chamber manually.

Semi-automatic rifles fire one cartridge at a time. Automatic rifles fire continuously while the trigger is depressed. Examples include AR-15 and AK-47 style semi-automatic or automatic firearms.

Ammunition: Rifle cartridges are usually longer and more powerful than those for handguns. Rifles may hold 1 to 20 cartridges. Some may be loaded manually, while others use a magazine, which can expand capacity.

Using a Cable Lock for Secure Storage: Open action or remove bolt. Remove magazine. Thread the cable through the ejection port and out the receiver assembly or magazine well.

SHOTGUNS

Mechanics: Single- and double-barreled shotguns have a hinge to eject and enter cartridges or shells.

Pump-action shotguns eject and load new shells when a handle is pumped.

Semi-automatic shotguns fire one shell at a time by pulling the trigger.

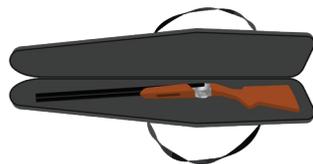
Ammunition: Shotguns fire shells. They vary in size or “gauge.” Shells contain many tiny pellets called “shot” that spread out once fired to target a bigger area.

Using a Cable Lock for Secure Storage: With the bolt in open position, thread the cable through the loading and ejection ports.

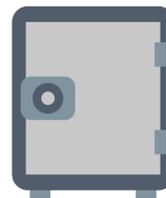


Storage Cases:

Long guns are better stored in large hard cases, taller safes, and gun cabinets.



\$40 - \$350



\$50 - \$450



\$200 - \$2,500

Tips for Talking About Firearms

Building Comfort and Trust

- It's okay to feel nervous or uncomfortable talking about firearms.
- It's normal to have your own beliefs and feelings about firearms. It's important to recognize these for yourself before having a conversation with a firearm owner.
- Firearm owners are more willing to talk about firearms with someone who has worked to build a relationship with them - someone they feel they can trust. This trust can be built in as little as one meeting.
- To build this trust, it's helpful to approach these conversations with curiosity rather than judgment. Your role may just be to explore different options for secure storage while letting the Veteran do most of the talking.
- You may not have all the answers, so don't worry about sounding like an expert. Think of the Veteran as the expert on their firearms.
- Let the Veteran pick the storage option(s) they think will work best for them. It's important for them to be comfortable with their storage choices. If they have trouble deciding, ask permission to suggest an option.
- Veterans own firearms for different reasons. It can be helpful to ask Veterans about their reasons for owning different kinds of firearms, as this may affect their reasons for storing them in different ways.
- Many people own firearms for personal protection. It can be helpful to acknowledge this and work flexibly with their preferences for changes to firearm storage.

Opening the Conversation

- Invite the Veteran to have a conversation - "Would it be all right if we talk about the firearms you own?" Thank them for being willing to discuss.
- State what you ARE and ARE NOT trying to do. For example, "I'm not trying to have your guns taken away or convince you to get rid of them. What I am trying to do is understand how you store firearms and discuss whether you may want to make changes."
- Note that firearm ownership comes with a lot of responsibility. Ask about whom they have a responsibility to protect from firearm injuries - themselves, children, or community.
- If the Veteran doesn't want to talk about firearms at that particular moment, ask if they are open to discussing later. You will likely want to revisit this conversation anyway.
- Try to use open-ended questions rather than ones that can be answered with "yes"/"no."

Close-Ended	Open-Ended
Do you own firearms?	Tell me about the firearms you own.

Getting Specific

It can be helpful to get as much information as you can about the firearms that a Veteran owns and the way they are stored. The following are questions you may consider asking to help you develop a more detailed plan for securing all firearms.

NOTE: Approach these questions thoughtfully, ideally after you've established some trust with the Veteran.

- Tell me about the firearms you own (what kinds?).
- How many do you own?
- What is the story of your firearm(s)? (ex: how did you come to own it, is it an heirloom?)
- Tell me how you usually store your firearm(s).
- What safety and security practices do you use right now?
- What safety and security practices are used by other firearm owners whom you know? Why?
- What would make you want to change your current firearm storage practices?
- Listen for details about:
 - Where the firearm is located.
 - Whether it is concealed or locked in any way.
 - Whether it is stored loaded, and where other ammunition is kept.
 - Whether anyone else has access to it.

Considering Risk

If you know that the Veteran has had thoughts about suicide at any time, ask if they've ever thought about using their firearm to take their own life. If they own or have access to multiple firearms, ask them which firearm(s) they have thought of using. This is extremely important for developing alternate storage practices for that weapon.

Learn more about having conversations about secure storage with Veterans.

For more information and examples of what these conversations can look like, have a look at A Veteran's Guide to Discussing STORES: Secure Storage to Reduce Suicide Risk at <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/VISN16/a-veterans-guide-to-discussing-stores.asp>.



Making Changes to Firearm Storage Practices

Identifying Reasons to Change

There are many reasons someone may want to make changes to firearm storage, such as:

- Someone in the home is having a mental health crisis, and there is concern they may harm themselves or someone else.
- There are memory-related concerns, such as dementia, about someone in the home.
- Neighbors, children, grandchildren, etc. are coming to the home.
- The firearm owner will be out of town for an extended period.
- There is increased concern regarding theft.

To help firearm owners identify their motivations to change, we summarize research that highlights the importance of secure storage in the section, **Reasons to Securely Store Firearms** on Page 11. No matter the reason, highlight that storage practices are flexible and temporary. The firearm owner can change storage practices again in the future.

Identifying Barriers and Potential Solutions

There may also be reasons that someone feels they are unable to change the way they store firearms. It is important to understand what those barriers to change may be. Explore these with them and work together to identify possible solutions.

Try asking:

- Are there any things that keep you from storing your firearm like that right now?

Common Barriers	Potential Solutions
Personal protection is their primary reason for having a firearm, so easy access to a loaded firearm is important.	Work with them to identify whether any small changes may be acceptable. For example, biometric safes or trigger locks, which can be unlocked with their fingerprint, allow very quick access without entering any code. When suicide risk is of concern, it may be helpful to note that 70% of Veteran suicides occur by firearm; in cases of suicidality, Veterans may be more of a danger to themselves than other people.
Secure storage devices cost money.	Discuss options for obtaining free cable locks. Some states offer free or reduced-price gun safes. Work with them on a realistic plan to save for the device they want while using alternative secure storage practices in the meantime. Information about device costs can be found in the Resources section (Page 15).
There is not enough space in the Veteran's home for the preferred storage device.	Discuss the possibility of temporary or alternative legal storage plans for the time being. For example, if the Veteran has several long guns but no room for a taller gun cabinet, discuss the possibility of locking cases for long guns instead.

Encouraging Change

Getting stuck during the conversation? Consider using skills for building motivation (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Consider asking:

- On a scale from 0 to 10, how **IMPORTANT** is it for you to change your storage practices right now?



- On a scale from 0 to 10, how **CONFIDENT** are you that you could make this change?



Depending on what is said, you could follow-up with:

An Observation: “Sounds like securing your firearms is important to you.”

This helps to affirm the Veteran’s choice to engage in secure storage practices and can be said if they indicate any level of importance above a 0.

A Question: “Why did you rate yourself at a 5 on IMPORTANCE and not a 2?”

This pulls for the individual to give you their reasons for making a change, as opposed to telling you why it should stay the way it is now.

A Question: “What would it take to increase your CONFIDENCE from an 8 to a 10?”

This will tell you what barriers may need to be worked through with the individual.

In a more challenging scenario, they may say they are a “0” on IMPORTANCE.

“It sounds like changing your storage practices isn’t important to you right now. Are there any situations that would increase the importance of making such a change?”

This pulls for the individual to identify scenarios that may prompt change. If they are unable to generate reasons, you can ask permission to provide a handful of examples that other firearm owners have highlighted (ex: first child is born, significant other is going through a mental health crisis, they are about to be deployed).

A Secure Storage Plan

How to Develop a Minutes Matter Secure Storage Plan

Use the **Minutes Matter Secure Storage Plan** (Page 12) to identify all the possible combinations of options for securely storing firearms.

STEP 1 includes places where a firearm may be stored. They are listed, from bottom to top, from the least to most amount of time it would take to access a firearm. In-home storage is often preferred and there are many options for this choice. Some, such as a gun safe, require more time to access than other options, like a nightstand. Out-of-home storage (ex: with a friend, at a retailer) provides the most time and distance. It is a great option when there are concerns about the safety of those in the home. It is essential to be familiar with local laws and ensure Veterans or their family members are also aware of the laws.

STEP 2 includes additional ways to delay the use a firearm. This is especially helpful when in-home storage methods are chosen. For example, one could store ammunition in a closet separate from the firearm; the firearm unloaded and without the firing pin in a nightstand; and the firearm's firing pin in a hard to reach place.

***Note:** Options in Steps 1 and 2 can be combined for single or multiple firearms owned. Use as many options as needed. The plan can be filled out online or on paper by checking the appropriate fields. If multiple firearms are owned, use separate sheets for each, or assign different numbers, initials, or colored inks to indicate the storage option for each firearm.*

STEP 3 includes space to write the plan for securely storing firearms. This includes selections from Steps 1 and 2. It can also include future steps toward secure storage, like talking about storage with family or saving for an expensive option like a biometric safe. You can also note reasons to change storage plans (ex: when grandchildren visit) and list people who can help carry out these plans (ex: spouse, parent).



Reasons to Securely Store Firearms

Securing firearms is an important responsibility.

Suicide

- Ninety percent of firearm suicide attempts are fatal.¹ Seventy percent of Veteran suicides are by firearm.²
- Nearly 25% of all suicide attempts occur in the first five minutes of a suicidal crisis. Roughly 70% occur within one hour.³
Minutes matter.
- Risk for suicide is higher when firearms are stored unlocked and loaded.^{4,5}
- Increasing the time it takes to access a loaded firearm may save a life.
Minutes matter.



Child Safety

- Three out of four children know where firearms are kept in their home.⁶
- Teaching children not to touch firearms does not stop them from doing so.⁷
- Firearms are the #1 cause of death among children. Firearms involved in youth deaths are often stored loaded, unlocked and in a bedroom.⁸
- Up to 30% of youth firearm injuries and deaths could be prevented by storing firearms more securely.⁹ **Minutes matter.**

Theft

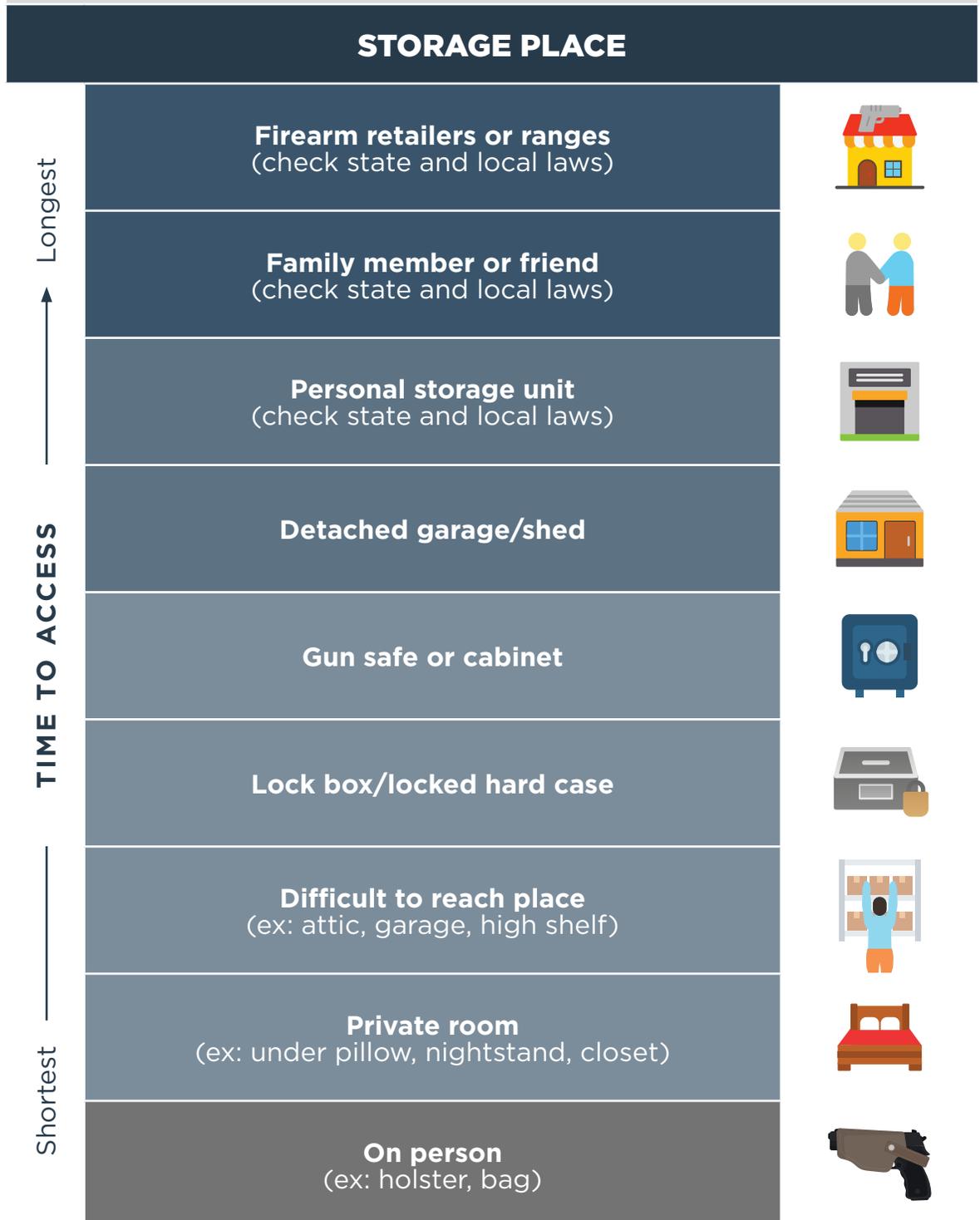
- A firearm is stolen every 90 seconds.¹⁰
- 25% of stolen firearms are stolen from personal vehicles.¹¹
- Firearms are three times more likely to be stolen when brought out of the home.¹⁰
- Stolen firearms may be sold illegally and used to commit a crime.¹¹
- Keeping firearms unsecured, even for personal safety, increases the risk of danger in our communities.



MINUTES MATTER

OPTIONS FOR SECURE FIREARM STORAGE

STEP 1. Pick a place to securely store your firearm(s).



MINUTES MATTER

OPTIONS FOR SECURE FIREARM STORAGE

STEP 2. Add time to access with extra safety measures.

DISASSEMBLE THE FIREARM

Remove firing pin



Disassemble



ASK SOMEONE ELSE

Give key/code to others



REMOVE AMMUNITION

Unloaded



Chamber flag



Separate ammo



USE DIFFERENT LOCKS FOR LOCKBOX, CABINET, OR SAFE

Biometric



Keypad



Combo



Key



STORE WITH REMINDERS

VCL number

9-8-8 + 1

Safety plan

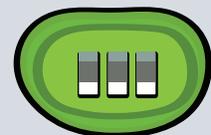
1. Skills
2. People
3. Help

LOCK THE FIREARM

Cable lock



Trigger lock





MINUTES MATTER

OPTIONS FOR SECURE FIREARM STORAGE

STEP 3. My plans to securely store firearms:

1. _____

2. _____

What might change about this plan:

Who will help me with this plan:

NOTE: Many of the storage practices in Step 1 and Step 2 can be used together, so choose as many as you would like.

STEP 1. Pick a place to securely store your firearm(s).

STORAGE PLACE

Firearm retailers or ranges
(check state and local laws)

Family member or friend
(check state and local laws)

Personal storage unit
(check state and local laws)

Detached garage/shed

Gun safe or cabinet

Lock box/locked hard case

Difficult to reach place
(ex: attic, garage, high shelf)

Private room
(ex: under pillow, nightstand, closet)

On person
(ex: holster, bag)



Shortest —————
↑
————— Longest

TIME TO ACCESS

STEP 2. Add time to access with extra safety measures.

DISASSEMBLE THE FIREARM

Remove firing pin



Disassemble



ASK SOMEONE ELSE

Give key/code to others



REMOVE AMMUNITION

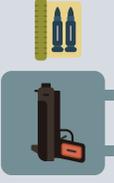
Unloaded



Chamber flag



Separate ammo



USE DIFFERENT LOCKS FOR LOCKBOX, CABINET, OR SAFE

Biometric



Keypad



Combo



Key



STORE WITH REMINDERS

VCL number

9-8-8 + 1

Safety plan



Cable lock



Trigger lock



LOCK THE FIREARM

STEP 3. My plans to securely store firearms:

1. _____
What might change about this plan: _____

2. _____
Who will help me with this plan: _____

Resources for Veterans

Firearm Storage Devices and Alternative Storage Locations

Type	Description
VA Resources	<p>Cable Locks</p> <p>Available from your local VA, many police stations, and many local safety coalitions</p> <p>Request a free cable lock from a local VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator: https://www.va.gov/find-locations/.</p>
Other Resources	<p>Cable Locks*</p> <p>Available from your local VA, many police stations, and many local safety coalitions</p> <p>Project Child Safe free safety kit: https://projectchildsafe.org/get-a-safety-kit/</p>
	<p>Chamber Flags, Trigger Locks, Lock Boxes, Safes, and Gun Cabinets*</p> <p>Available from local firearm retailers, sporting goods stores, and sometimes large retailers</p>
	<p>GunSkin*</p> <p>FREE (for Veterans) vinyl wraps with images of loved ones that can be applied to pistol grips</p> <p>https://covermeveterans.org/</p>
	<p>Voluntary Out-of-Home*</p> <p>Maps to find firearm retailers and, in some states, law enforcement locations that offer temporary out-of-home storage services</p> <p>National: https://pausetoprotect.org/secure-storage/##ss-outofhome-options</p> <p>Louisiana: www.armoryproject.org</p> <p>Colorado: https://pausetoprotect.org/secure-storage/##ss-outofhome-options</p> <p>New Jersey: https://gunviolenceresearchcenter.rutgers.edu/nj-firearm-storage-map/</p> <p>Washington: https://fiprp.uw.edu/tools-dissemination/resources/</p> <p>Maryland: https://mdpgv.org/safestoragemap/</p> <p>Mississippi: http://mikeanestis.weebly.com/ms-gun-storage-map.html</p> <p>New York: https://rockinst.org/blog/new-york-firearm-storage-map/</p> <p>Wisconsin: https://www.betherewis.com/firearm-storage-online-map/</p>

*not an endorsement or VA Resource

Resources for Veterans

Additional Education about Secure Firearm Storage

Type	Description
VA Resources	<p>Storage Education and Conversation Tips</p> <p>A Veteran’s Guide to Discussing STORES: Secure Storage to Reduce Suicide Risk – designed to help Veterans talk to other Veterans about secure firearm storage for suicide prevention</p> <p>https://www.mirecc.va.gov/VISN16/a-veterans-guide-to-discussing-stores.asp</p>
Other Resources	<p>Storage Education and Conversation Tips*</p> <p>Worried About a Veteran – helps individuals identify potential firearm storage options and offers guidance on how to have a conversation about firearm storage with a Veteran</p> <p>https://worriedaboutaveteran.org/</p>
	<p>Storage Education and How to Install a Cable Lock*</p> <p>Project Child Safe – helps individuals identify potential firearm storage options</p> <p>https://projectchildsafe.org/securing-your-firearm/</p>
	<p>Storage Education*</p> <p>Lock2Live – tool to help make decisions about temporarily reducing access to firearms</p> <p>https://lock2live.org/</p>
	<p>Storage Education and Conversation Tips*</p> <p>BulletPoints Project – helps identify potential firearm storage options and offers guidance on how to have a conversation about firearm storage with patients</p> <p>https://www.bulletpointsproject.org/</p>
	<p>Firearm Culture Education*</p> <p>Walk the Talk America – course and other resources to help mental health providers (and others) learn about gun culture and suicide prevention</p> <p>https://walkthetalkamerica.org/classes/</p>

**not an endorsement or VA Resource*

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