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## Development of an Online Map of Safe Gun Storage Sites in Maryland for Suicide Prevention

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### Abstract

Reducing access to lethal means of self-harm is a cornerstone of suicide prevention, and temporary, voluntary gun storage outside the home is one recommended approach. With the goal of facilitating access to gun storage outside the home in Maryland, we developed an online map of gun shops and law enforcement agencies willing to offer temporary, voluntary gun storage on a case-by-case basis. This project was modeled off of prior work by the Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition. As of July 2020, 32 gun shops and 3 law enforcement agencies agreed to be listed on our map. Others were hesitant to participate due to perceived legal and logistical barriers to temporary firearm storage. We demonstrate the feasibility of creating an online map that lists organizations offering temporary gun storage in Maryland. This brief report details our process, barriers encountered, and future considerations to improve access to offsite gun storage options.

### Keywords

firearm; suicide/self-harm; mental health; web-based; public health

## INTRODUCTION

Suicide is the leading cause of firearm-related death in the United States, and the availability of guns in the home has been associated with increased risk of suicide.[1, 2] In Maryland, over 250 suicides involving firearms occur each year.[2] Moreover, the higher suicide rates observed in rural areas are driven by higher firearm-related suicides.[3] Reducing access to lethal means of self-harm, such as firearms, is a cornerstone of suicide prevention.[4, 5] Firearm storage outside of the home is recommended as one of the safest approaches.[4] In fact, there may be an even greater need for safe firearm storage options outside the

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### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ms. Bongiorno and Mr. Kramer contacted organizations about participation in the map and completed all other steps to develop this online resource, collected data on organizations contacted, and drafted the manuscript. Ms. Bongiorno and Mr. Kramer contributed equally to this paper. Ms. Booty provided guidance on development of the map and critically revised the manuscript. Dr. Crifasi conceptualized and oversaw the project, provided guidance on development of the map, and critically revised the manuscript.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

home during the current COVID-19 pandemic.[6] The pandemic has been associated with both record increases in firearm sales as well as worsening of mental health likely due to increased social isolation and economic consequences, all of which may leave individuals at greater risk of firearm-related suicide.[6-8]

In Maryland, Extreme Risk Protective Orders (ERPOs) can be used to require someone to surrender all firearms if they are deemed an imminent danger to themselves or others. [9] However, there are other reasons that fall outside the scope of ERPOs for which Marylanders may wish to temporarily store firearms outside of their home. For example, a firearm owner may be concerned about an adolescent or other member of the household who is experiencing a mental health crisis and may want to ensure they cannot access a firearm during this time. As another example, grandparents may want to temporarily remove firearms from their home while young grandchildren are visiting.

In 2019, the Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition developed a map of Colorado gun shops and law enforcement agencies willing to offer temporary, voluntary gun storage on a case-by-case basis.[10] This effort was motivated by the desire to facilitate safe gun storage to prevent suicides. A similar map was published for Washington State in February 2020.[11] Without a similar map in Maryland, Marylanders in the midst of a crisis had no easy way of finding a place to safely store a firearm outside their home. Considering that temporary transfer laws vary by state and Maryland has more stringent firearm laws including permit-to-purchase laws for handguns,[5] it was unclear how many organizations would offer offsite storage in Maryland. We aimed to replicate the Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition's project in order to facilitate access to safe gun storage outside of the home to prevent suicides in Maryland. We worked in partnership with Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence to publish an online map of temporary, voluntary gun storage sites in Maryland.

## DEVELOPMENT OF MAP

We started by generating a list of firearm dealers, ranges, and law enforcement agencies in Maryland. To identify all firearm dealers and related businesses, we systematically searched Google Maps across Maryland using the following search terms: gun range, gun shop(s), firearm, firing range, shooting range, and armory. To identify relevant law enforcement agencies, we purchased a customized directory from the National Public Safety Information Bureau with contact information for all municipal law enforcement agencies, state police, and county sheriffs in Maryland.[12] In total, we identified 215 firearm dealers and related businesses and 133 relevant law enforcement agencies.

Between January and April 2020, each of the organizations on our list was contacted to ask if they currently offered voluntary, temporary gun storage or would be willing to consider such requests on a case-by-case basis. Based on guidance from the Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition, we understood phone calls would be the preferred way for firearm dealers and ranges to receive requests; therefore, we contacted each of these businesses on our list by phone. We followed up with each business a second time if we were unable to reach an owner or manager on our first attempt. We also followed up with many businesses via email if they requested more information during the initial phone contact or were unable to be

reached by phone. For each law enforcement agency, we contacted the Chief of Police, Sheriff, or Commander via email at least once asking if their organization offered temporary, voluntary gun storage to members of the community.

We had direct communication with 132 gun shops and ranges (61.4% of list), while the remaining businesses on our initial list were not able to be reached due to closures related to COVID-19 and/or phone numbers that were not in service. Of the 133 law enforcement agencies contacted, 19 (14.3%) replied to our initial inquiry. We compiled a list of all businesses and agencies in Maryland that indicated they would offer temporary, voluntary gun storage, at least on a case-by-case basis, and were willing to be listed on our online map.

By the time of online publication of the map in May 2020, 29 gun shops and ranges and 3 law enforcement agencies were listed on our map. Participating organizations were identified across a wide geographic area within Maryland (Figure 1). In fact, 15 of the 24 counties in Maryland had at least one participating organization. In addition, at least 12 participating gun shops indicated that they had prior experience offering some form of voluntary firearm storage to community members.

Of the law enforcement agencies that responded to our inquiry, 4 additional organizations indicated they provide temporary, voluntary firearm storage to local residents but did not want this service advertised on a public map, while others declined participation in the map due to liability concerns and/or because they did not have official protocols to handle voluntary firearm storage requests. Of note, 28 (21%) of the law enforcement agencies in our directory were under the jurisdiction of the Maryland State Police. Individual Maryland State Police locations were not permitted to make their own decision about participation in the map as the Maryland State Police Headquarters sets policy for all of the locations. We spoke with the office at Headquarters that would be able to implement this policy, and they declined to offer temporary, voluntary firearm storage at this time. As such, the only law enforcement agencies listed on the map at the time of publication were local police departments.

Gun shops that declined participation in our online map shared common concerns regarding temporary firearm storage. Of the 132 gun shops and ranges that we received responses from, 29 (22.0%) agreed to be listed on the map after initial communication while another 34 (25.8%) indicated they would consider participating but needed more information and/or time to consider the implications to their business. Among the 103 (78.0%) businesses that either declined participation or were hesitant to participate, 26 (25.2%) were uncertain about the logistics of returning the firearm to the owner and concerned about legal issues such as whether a background check would be required. In addition, 23 gun shops and ranges (22.3%) were concerned about assuming liability for the gun during storage and were uncertain if any damage would be covered by their insurance. 13 (12.6%) indicated they simply did not have space at their business for temporary gun storage.

After the launch of the map to the public, 3 gun shops and ranges indicated they were interested in being added to the map, bringing the total number of organizations listed on the map to 35 as of July 2020. The map was promoted via social media channels. We

also collaborated with the Maryland Department of Health and the Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics to distribute information about the map as a new gun storage resource for Marylanders. The map can be accessed at: [www.mdsafegunstorage.org](http://www.mdsafegunstorage.org).

## DISCUSSION

Overall, this project demonstrates the feasibility of creating an online map that lists firearm dealers and law enforcement agencies offering voluntary and temporary gun storage in Maryland. At the time of this publication, 35 organizations across a wide geographic area throughout Maryland were willing to be listed on this map. This map provides Marylanders with a centralized resource listing potential offsite safe gun storage options should they want to store a firearm outside their home.

While the safe storage map project was initially developed in Colorado and recently replicated in Washington state, Maryland has more stringent firearm legislation than either of these states. Our experience developing this map in Maryland suggests it is feasible to develop safe storage maps in other states with more stringent firearm laws. We did find, however, that enthusiasm for participating in this online map was at times hampered by gun shops' perceived barriers to offering temporary gun storage. Concerns raised by gun shops in Maryland echoed concerns about temporary, voluntary storage cited in prior studies.[10, 13] In particular, gun shops were concerned about the logistics of returning a firearm to the owner and about assuming liability for a gun during storage.

Prior to beginning the project, we recognized notable differences between firearm legislation in Maryland and Colorado that could present additional barriers to temporary, voluntary gun storage. For example, Maryland requires that any individual seeking to purchase a handgun to first obtain a Handgun Qualification License, which includes a fingerprint-based background check facilitated by Maryland State Police.[14] Colorado and Washington state do not have similar permit-to-purchase laws.[5] It is unclear how these licensing laws would impact an individual who purchased their handgun prior to implementation of these laws in 2013 and was now trying to get their handgun back after temporary, voluntary, off-site storage. This is an area that needs additional consideration and future research. In addition, Colorado has state legislation exempting background check requirements for transfers that are temporary, which is explicitly defined as a 72-hour period.[5] By contrast, in Maryland the definition of a temporary transfer is less well defined.[5] In the 2006 case of *Chow v State*, the Maryland Court of Appeals held that a temporary firearm loan to another adult does not qualify as a transfer and therefore does not require a background check. However, the ruling did not go so far as to specify the scope of "temporary" transfers.[5] Additionally, this ruling was prior to the implementation of Maryland's Handgun Qualification License in 2013.[14] Furthermore, in our discussions with firearm dealers we found that many businesses were either unaware of this ruling or still were under the impression that temporary transfers were not exempt from Maryland background check requirements despite the ruling of *Chow v State*. Another barrier present in both Maryland and Colorado is that neither state has guidance on the return of firearms to previously suicidal individuals.[15] There also is no legislation releasing the individual or organization temporarily storing the gun from liability regarding returning the firearm.[15]

Safe firearm storage options are needed now more than ever as the United States experiences increased firearm sales and social and economic consequences related to the COVID-19 pandemic that may leave individuals even more vulnerable to suicide.[6] While creating this online map is one step towards facilitating safe firearm storage in Maryland, logistical and legal barriers to temporary storage remain. To address these barriers, Maryland legislators could consider: 1) clearly defining the timing of “temporary” transfers; 2) explicitly easing background check requirements as they relate to temporary transfers in cases where there is concern for self-harm; and 3) releasing individuals and organizations offering temporary storage from liability related to returning the firearm. Each of these changes could help make temporary, voluntary gun storage more widely available in Maryland and facilitate this promising approach to protect our communities from firearm-related suicide.

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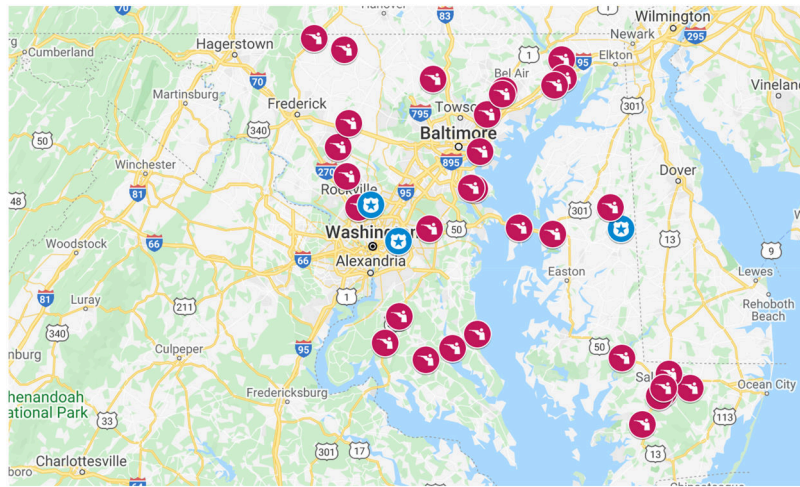
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**Figure 1:** Online map identifying 35 organizations across a wide geographic area within Maryland that consider voluntary, temporary gun storage requests. Blue icons represent law enforcement agencies and red icons represent gun shops and ranges. When a user clicks on each icon, the name of the organization, street address, phone number and, if applicable, business website is provided.