

Lok-It-Up: Partnering for Safety

By Tony Gomez

Firearms – in the wrong hands – are a public health concern. Tragic consequences include suicides, homicides, threats in schools and other public venues, and unintentional shootings.

Firearm owners worry about having their guns stolen, but they also want quick and easy access in case of an intruder. There are devices on the market that provide quick access and yet meet requirements for security, but many gun owners may not know about them. This led to a partnership – now 12 years old – between Public Health and several large retailers in Seattle and Western Washington.

In 1997, the Safe Storage coalition (later named the Lok-It-Up coalition) was established by the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center. The Washington State Department of Health and Public Health - Seattle & King County now staff the coalition.

The Fred Meyer Corporation was the first to offer discounts on safe storage lockboxes. Now other businesses continue the partnership.

Public Health - Seattle & King County approached the Costco Corporation to inquire about expanding promotion of the lock box Fred Meyer had sold, which Costco was selling as a “dorm safe.” They discussed the violence prevention benefits of keeping firearms away from youth. After consideration by corporate leadership and running the numbers, Costco expanded promotion and sales of the approved device, and later added several other lines, including high-end safes and vaults. Costco indicated to Public Health that, in addition to the potential market-driven benefits of this work, it was the right thing to do since its leaders support violence prevention. The warehouse chain reported tremendous success, mostly through online sales.

Including the work with Costco, the following elements of Lok-It-Up were highly successful:

- Tracking sales of safe storage devices through partnerships with businesses, including gun dealers

- Training health care providers on how to speak with clients about safe storage
- Updating the Lok-It-Up Web site (www.lokitup.org), which provides information and received 209,000 hits in 2008
- Developing an interactive display used at firing ranges, gun dealers, and health conferences to illustrate safe storage options
- Working with news media on stories about safe gun storage.

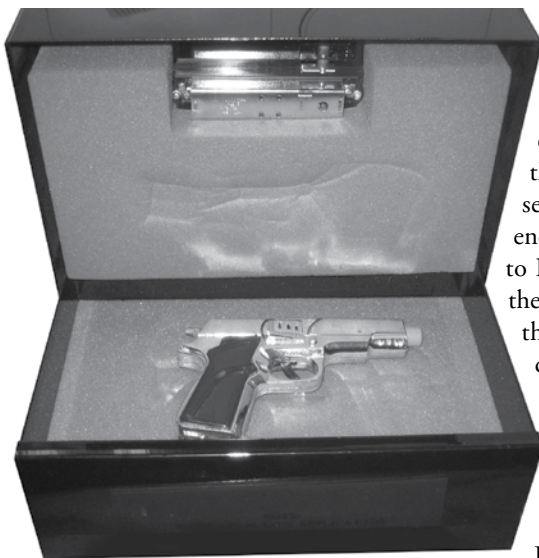
Sales of approved devices have been tracked with Costco and Sportco, a retail and wholesale sporting good store and supplier. Sportco last reported \$1.4 million in annual sales of firearm security devices. Costco reported annual sales of 9,500 safe storage devices in 2007, a huge increase from the 50 lock boxes sold the first year. Sales of all approved security devices through Costco ran into the millions of dollars, with sales of security devices throughout the world.

According to the CDC-Behavioral Risk Factor Survey for King County, from 1996 through 2002, the proportion of children in households where firearms are both loaded and unlocked has declined significantly. Despite these improvements, risk of adverse firearms-related outcomes persist. Information from the 2004 Healthy Youth Survey found an estimated 8,200 students statewide in grades eight, ten and twelve carried a firearm at least once during the last 30 days. Outcomes of the easy availability of firearms to youth contribute on average to 22 deaths and 23 hospitalizations per year in Washington State.

The program was funded until 2007 through Preventive Health and Health Services block grants from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Since then, other state public health dollars have continued the work, but at a reduced level. Because of cuts in local public health funding, some cities and counties around the state have lost their violence prevention staff. On a positive note, the City of Seattle hired a new firearms prevention lead, who is working with the other partner organizations, Washington State Department of Health, Public Health - Seattle & King County, the State Youth Suicide Prevention Program, and a statewide firearms violence prevention group. ■

Author

Tony Gomez, BS, RS, is the manager of Violence and Injury Prevention, Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention Section, Prevention Division, Public Health - Seattle & King County and a clinical faculty instructor in the Department of Health Services, UW School of Public Health.



Lok-It-Up Safe.