



## Trauma Association of South Carolina

### Position Statement on Firearm Safety

#### INTRODUCTION

Each year in the United States firearm injuries cause more than 30,000 deaths<sup>1</sup>. Injury and fatalities related to firearms are the result of unintentional injuries, intentional injury towards others, or intentional injury toward self. Firearm injuries and fatalities have a tremendous impact on the state and citizens of South Carolina.

#### SITUATION / ANALYSIS

The statistics regarding firearm injuries and fatalities speak for themselves:

- From 2014-2018, over 188,000 fatalities were related to firearms in the United States (CDC).
  - Specifically, in South Carolina there were almost 4,300 fatalities related to firearms during the same time frame, approximately 860 a year.
- The South Carolina Firearm Death Rate is higher than the National Rate: 17.7 vs. 12 (CDC).
- In 2015, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control estimated that firearm injuries in South Carolina cost \$70.9 million in hospital and ED charges (SC DHEC).
- Firearm-related fatalities cost more than \$30.4 million in medical costs and lost productivity (SC DHEC).
- Children (ages 0-17) are not excluded from firearm injuries and mortalities. In 2019, there were a total of 42 child fatalities related to firearms (SC State Child Fatality Advisory Committee).

**Unintentional Injuries:** South Carolina was ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the United States in deaths from unintentional discharge of firearms from 2004-2014. (South Carolina Injury Profile-DHEC 2015). Accidental discharge of firearms may occur from the firearm being left unattended or unsecured, a firearm being discharged while cleaning, or from improper holstering of the firearm. Common circumstances that resulted in an unintentional firearm fatality include alcohol consumption (in approximately a quarter of the deaths), playing with the firearm, not checking to see if the gun was unloaded and hunting (Solnick & Hemenway, 2019).

**Intentional Injuries-Suicide:** Each year, there are approximately 20,000 individuals who die from firearm suicide each year, with the suicide rate increasing by nearly one third over the past 20 years (CDC). Firearms are the most frequently used method of suicide in the United States, comprising nearly two-thirds of gun deaths. "In South Carolina there is an average of 18 hours between gun suicide deaths" (Every Town Research). In critical moments, reducing access to firearms can save lives.

**Intentional Injuries-Homicide:** In South Carolina annual firearm homicides are on the rise, with 338 in 2017-a 48% increase over the past seven years (Alpers, et al). 76% of all homicides in South Carolina are due to firearms. Nationally "for at least the past twenty-five years, more intimate partner homicides have been committed with guns than with all other weapons combined" (Fox and Zawitz, 2009).

**Pediatrics and Firearm Injuries:** Firearms not being secured properly greatly contribute to the injury and fatalities of children; 58% of the child suicide deaths involved a non-secured firearm (SC State Child Fatality Advisory Committee, 2018). Of the 42 firearm related SC child fatalities (ages 0-17) in 2019, 62% were homicides, 19% were suicides and 16% were accidents (SC State Child Fatality Advisory Committee, 2019). Twelve children, age twelve and under died in unintentional shootings involving children in South Carolina from May 2016 to May 2018-this ranks South Carolina as third in the nation, only behind Texas (15) and Missouri (14)-both with large populations (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). Firearms are the second leading cause of death among children and teens in South Carolina, with number one being motor vehicle traffic (Every Town Research).



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### CONCLUSION

The Trauma Association of South Carolina (TASC) believes through the following initiatives, lives can be saved in the state of South Carolina: proper firearm safety handling and storage, firearm community awareness and outreach programs including violence safety programs, and suicide awareness.

TASC supports the following initiatives:

- Community awareness and outreach programs regarding firearm safety and handling are imperative to decrease firearm injuries and deaths. Firearm safety and handling topics that should be included in these programs are:
  - When handling a firearm, these four safety tips should be followed: always assume the gun is loaded, keep your finger off trigger until ready to fire, never point the firearm at anything you don't intend to kill or destroy, and always check all chambers before cleaning.
  - Firearms should be properly stored in a locked firearm safe or secured with a firearm lock. Ideally, bullets should be kept in a separate location from the firearm.
  - When holstering the firearm on your person, the firearm should be secured in an appropriate firearm holster
  - Children should be instructed they are not to handle a firearm without an adult present. Furthermore, if they find or see a firearm, children should not touch the firearm, instead they should alert an adult immediately.
  - If a child will be visiting someone else's home, the child's caregiver is encouraged to ask if there is a firearm in the home where they will be visiting, as well as ask how the firearm is secured.
  - Alcohol use is a significant modifiable risk factor in firearm safety. Firearms should not be handled after consumption of alcohol or while intoxicated
- If there is a concern that someone in the home may be at risk of harming themselves or others due to violence, suicidal thoughts, or at risk of accidental injury, consideration should be given to temporarily relocating firearms away from the home or other places the person may gain access to firearms.
- Increase suicide awareness and screening, as well as utilization of resources such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255).
- Firearm violence prevention programs are a valuable resource and should be utilized throughout the community to individuals of all ages.
- Firearms that are no longer wanted should be disposed of appropriately; to find available programs, the local police station should be contacted.
- Support of interpersonal violence prevention programs as well as resources such as The National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233).

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