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LOCAL

## Local gun safety group provides gun locks to prevent accidental shootings, suicides

BY KAITLIN WASHBURN

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Grandparents for Gun Safety aims to prevent accidental shootings and suicides among kids and teens by giving out free gun locks to parents around Kansas City area. BY KAITLIN WASHBURN



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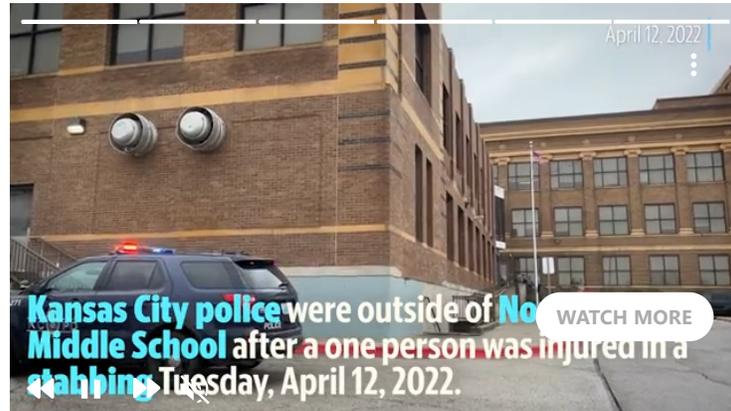
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Dozens of people in Missouri were killed or injured in an accidental shooting last year, and a local gun safety group is trying to change that.

Grandparents for Gun Safety, a nonprofit founded in 2013, promotes gun safety across the Kansas City metro. Volunteers with the group's signature program, Lock It For Love, hand out free gun locks and safety information at community events in the city and surrounding areas.

"Our whole reason for doing this is to keep kids and grandkids from hurting themselves or others with a gun that is not properly stored," said Barbara McNeile, a Grandparents for Gun Safety volunteer who manages the program.

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"That's where we feel we can make an impact by emphasizing safety of kids and teens and protecting them from accidental shootings and suicide."

Since 2017, the organization has distributed nearly 5,000 gun locks around the metro and surrounding cities including Topeka and Independence.



The nonprofit Grandparents for Gun Safety hands out free gun locks at community events across the Kansas City metro area and surrounding cities. Kaitlin Washburn

“We are confident, based on our conversations and feedback, we have saved someone or someones’ life,” McNeile said.

At least 135 people have been killed in Missouri and over 300 people have been injured in accidental shootings from 2014 to present, according to data maintained by the [Gun Violence Archive](#). Those numbers are under-counted as accidental shootings in Missouri are not officially tracked. The archive’s data relies on news reports and law enforcement agencies.

During that period in Kansas City, at least 16 people died from accidental shootings and 35 were injured, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

Capt. Leslie Foreman, a spokeswoman for the Kansas City Police Department, said the department doesn’t track accidental shootings.

“However, they do happen and we always want to reinforce the message that guns need to be handled and stored in a safe manner, to include utilizing locked gun safes and gun locks,” Foreman said. “We must rely on the owners of guns to be responsible, especially when there are children involved.”

Last December, a [two-year-old died in Independence](#) after the toddler grabbed a gun that discharged and was struck in the head.

“If you have children in the house with firearms, they need to be stored [and] locked up. If that is not possible, they need to be stored out of reach, with ammunition out of the firearm and preferably stored in a different location than the firearm,” said Officer Jack Taylor, a spokesman for the Independence Police Department.

“We are aware that many people have firearms for home protection, however, there are gun safes that are made that allow quick access by an authorized person if needed.”

The inspiration for Lock It For Love came from [Women’s Voices Raised for Social Justice](#), a St. Louis-based organization that distributes free gun locks.

Grandparents for Gun Safety also partners with 13 area police departments who send community officers to join them at events. The officer walks people through how to use the locks, which work on a variety of firearms, from pistols to rifles.

On Saturday, Gail Roberson and Ann Hall, Grandparents for Gun Safety volunteers, and Officer Andy Hamil, a KCPD community officer, handed out gun locks at [Charlie’s House](#), a Kansas City organization focused on preventing kids from injury and death in the home.

“We really feel strongly that these gun locks are a big help in keeping people safe, especially vulnerable populations like children,” Hall said.



Officer Andy Hamil, a KCPD community police officer, demonstrates how to secure a gun lock on an unloaded gun at Charlie’s House, a Kansas City organization focused on preventing kids from injury and death in the home, on Saturday, April 2. Kaitlin Washburn

Hamil demonstrated how to carefully secure the gun lock on an unloaded gun.

“Kids find things around the home and they are curious, so if a child finds a gun laying around, that’s a danger,” Hamil said.

Dr. Shayla Sullivant, a pediatric psychiatrist with Children's Mercy, also partners with Grandparents for Gun Safety to distribute gun locks to parents.

Sullivant developed a presentation called "[Prepped and Ready](#)" to help parents understand issues facing teenagers, with an emphasis on suicide prevention.

"In the field of psychiatry ... there has not historically been a big focus on prevention. Often we are meeting people in crisis and trying to be helpful at that time," Sullivant said. "And so I thought we needed to do a better job when it comes to suicide prevention and safe storage, because there's a lot of research that shows safe storage can save lives."

In Missouri, suicide is the second leading [cause of death for people ages 10 to 24](#). The state's youth suicide rate is rising faster than all but four other states, according to research from [Everytown for Gun Safety](#).

Sullivant's message to parents is not to get rid of their guns, but to make sure they keep firearms safely secured so children can't reach them.

Grandparents for Gun Safety's next event runs from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturday at the Linwood YMCA's Easter basket giveaway.



Grandparents for Gun Safety volunteers Gail Roberson and Ann Hall and Officer Andy Hamil, a KCPD community officer, hand out gun locks at Charlie's House, a Kansas City organization focused on preventing kids from injury and death in the home, on Saturday, April 2. Kaitlin Washburn

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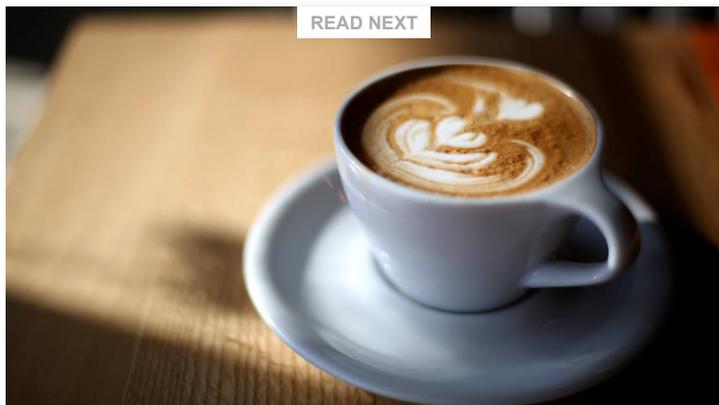
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Kaitlin Washburn covers gun violence for The Star as a 2020 Report for America corps member. She is a Missouri School of Journalism graduate and was previously a reporter covering agriculture in California.



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