

Introduction

Kirsten Barber: Before the podcast begins, please note that this episode includes discussions of firearm use amongst youth, criminal activity where firearms are used, death and self-harm. Due to this, portions of this episode may not be appropriate for all listeners.

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Kirsten: You're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast that dives into the stories of the people, programs and resources within the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Each episode, we'll give you the scoop from department personnel on how NCDPS enhances the safety of the people of North Carolina.

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Season 4 Episode 4

Kirsten Barber: A 2022 report by the North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force showed that from 2019 to 2021, the rate of firearm deaths among children and youth in North Carolina more than doubled. This made firearms the leading cause of injury-related death for children and youth in the state. With guns falling into the

wrong hands, our state was experiencing an urgent problem. Something had to be done. The result: NC S.A.F.E. It stands for Secure All Firearms Effectively and is North Carolina's statewide initiative designed to raise awareness of the importance of safe firearm storage. Established in 2023, the initiative provides resources and best practices for firearm storage and safety. NC S.A.F.E. is not associated with any advocacy-based initiatives related to gun laws or regulations. The initiative is run by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety and funded in part through the 2023 Byrne State Crisis Intervention Program.

[Pause]

Now, two years after the effort began, I sat down with two members behind this initiative to check in on how things are going across North Carolina.

Welcome to the Safety Scoop, everyone! I am so excited to be here because, firstly, we are bringing back our very first Safety Scoop guest, Deputy Secretary of the Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Deputy Secretary William Lassiter, thank you so much for returning for this episode.

Dep. Sec. William Lassiter: Absolutely, glad to do it.

Kirsten: And then with him we also have Jared Pone with NC S.A.F.E. Thank you, Jared, for joining us, as well.

Jared Pone: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Kirsten: I just want to give you both the opportunity to introduce yourself in case some people have not listened to any of our previous podcasts. So, Deputy Secretary Lassiter, can you kick us off?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Yeah, my name is Billy Lassiter. I'm the deputy secretary for the Department of Public Safety over Juvenile Justice. I've been with, uh, Juvenile Justice for almost 26 years. I started working in school safety and worked my way up through the system working with our juvenile court counselors and community programs and also in communications at one point with, um, with, uh, Juvenile Justice. And so, um, I've been many years in—in this field and—and working on trying to make North Carolina a safer place for our kids and our families.

Kirsten: Thank you, and Jared, can you introduce yourself to our listeners?

Jared: Sure. Everybody, I'm Jared Pone. I serve as the external affairs administrator here in the Division of Juvenile Justice with the Department of Public Safety. I have the honor to help lead NC S.A.F.E. alongside our Deputy Secretary Lassiter here. I've been around Juvenile Justice for several years as well. I'm a lawyer by profession. I have represented juvenile clients across the state of North Carolina about six or seven or so odd years. Uh, but my role here at JJ is a non-legal role. I want to emphasize that. It's a non-legal role, but I absolutely love working for

the administration. Um, it's been a truly a labor of love. I'm also a proud firearms owner. I've said I think that with the right to have a gun there's a responsibility to keep it safe, so NC S.A.F.E. is near and dear to me and to every and all the work that we do here in JJ and DPS as a whole.

Kirsten: And NC S.A.F.E. is Secure All Firearms Effectively. Well Billy, can you kick us off by walking us through how NC S.A.F.E. got started in the first place?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Yeah, so, um, NC S.A.F.E. is a campaign that we started almost two and a half years ago now. The purpose of the campaign was that we—we saw that there was an uptick right after the pandemic of, um, young people possessing firearms and especially, uh, committing crimes with firearms. Um, so, we saw an—an increase from 4% of juvenile crime that involved a firearm to, four years later, when we first started this program, that had jumped to 14% of the total crimes that were committed by juveniles were being committed with firearms. And that was concerning to us because when a kid is—is—is using a firearm to commit a crime, obviously it ups the level of the possibilities of someone getting seriously injured, it ups the legal ramifications for that kid and it's—it makes our state as a whole an—an unsafe place to be in. And so, we wanted to figure out, can we reduce the number of kids getting access to firearms that they're not supposed to have? And so, we started that discussion.

And it wasn't just that. We also saw a lot of the alarming statistics about young people dying due to firearms. Um, it became the number one killer of young

people in our state for injury-related deaths, and we also doubled the national rate in the number of homicides and suicides that were being committed by, um, young people, uh, in—in the state of North Carolina. So, we wanted to try to think of a way to address that issue, and one of the areas that all the advocates and people on both sides of this issue, um...

This is not necessarily a—a gun control issue. This is an issue about, um, responsible gun ownership, and so we wanted a—an approach that could have an effect but was also—had bipartisan support, and so we worked on it to figure out what that would be. And safe storage kept coming up as one of those issues that everybody seems to agree with, um, that they think it's an important issue, but yet most of the population that are gun owners aren't doing it right now. And so, we thought by doing a public—a public awareness campaign where we could reach out to gun owners and really try to influence them to make the right decision to keep that firearm safe, that that would make a huge difference.

And so, we started about two and a half years ago. We, um, at the same time Congress was passing the first gun legislation that they had passed in almost 20 years, and it included, um, money that could be focused on safe storage, and so we accessed a lot of th—those dollars, um, and as—to start the campaign. Um, and since that time, we've had two large weeks of action where we've gone all across the state of North Carolina and informed people about this and gave out gun locks. Um, so, lots of, uh, i—initiatives that have been part of this in partnering with law enforcement agencies, um, departments of health and

human services, departments of social services, with pediatricians, all, um, stakeholders to get this message out across the state of North Carolina.

Kirsten: That's fantastic! So, Jared, what is the overall goal of NC S.A.F.E.?

Jared: The overall goal of NC S.A.F.E. is to educate firearm owners that with the constitutional right to own a gun is a profound responsibility to keep it safe, and also to normalize that conversation around safe firearm storage with parents.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Jared put it in—in—in the right perspective. This is really a campaign that focuses on those things that can keep our—our young people safe, but also, um, veterans safe, adults safe. We've seen a uptick in the number of veterans that are coming back from deployments across the—the world and then coming home, um, and being suicidal, and by having these guns safely stored in the—in the home, we can limit the access that they have immediately, um, to possibly taking that life-taking decision. And so, while it's in Juvenile Justice, it's focus is a department-wide initiative where we're trying to really focus on not just, uh, juveniles having firearms, but also making sure that, um, adults make the right decisions about safely storing those firearms.

Jared: And today we've distributed over 120,000 gun locks. We've established partnerships with the Charlotte Motor Speedway, uh, several university athletic events, the state fair. We're at the state fair for two weeks giving out gun locks. Over 10,000 gun locks were actually given out at the state fair. Uh, we recently

partnered with the North Carolina National Guard. We gave them 10,000 gun locks to ensure that all of our citizen soldiers and airmen had access to safe firearm storage devices once they're deployed or when they come back from active duty.

Kirsten: So, like you guys have both said, safe firearm storage is something that impacts all communities across North Carolina, and you've, uh, spoken a little bit about just different members of communities and how that has impacted them and the families in North Carolina. Why does safe firearm storage matter? Uh, Billy, we'll start with you.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Well, it—it—it matters because, um, what we've seen across the state is just too many young people dying due to firearms that could have been easily, safely stored and out of the access of those young people's hands, um, ending up killing people, uh, and killing young people. We've seen just in the last year over, uh, seven kids that are under the age of five have lost their life to a sibling or a friend that pulled out a parent's gun and shooting them accidentally. Those were all accidental deaths, but they were *preventable* deaths, and that's what this campaign is really about is really focusing on making sure that we can end the preventable deaths that are, um, out there because of, um, easy access to really young people, um, getting those guns, but also, um, kids that, uh, older kids that are—are looking to use those guns to commit crimes. But also, adults that are thinking about committing crimes and, um, felons that are no longer

supposed to have guns because they're on probation, making sure that those people don't get access to firearms.

And so, t-to give you an example, we looked at, um, data across the state of North Carolina last year. We saw that over 400 guns were stolen from vehicles last year in the state of North Carolina. In 60% of those cases, those cars weren't even locked. Not only was the c—the gun not locked up in the vehicle, the car itself was not locked. Typically, those guns are left out on the front seat of a car, on the dashboard of a car. That's a easy target for someone that is looking to do criminal activity to easily, um, access that firearm. And so, we're really trying to emphasize the—this campaign because it makes our whole community safer, and that's what this department's all about. Um, we're the Department of Public Safety. We're trying to create a safer community for all of us to live in, um, and people that are not supposed to have access to firearms, making sure those people don't have them.

Kirsten: Jared, anything to add?

Jared: I agree with everything the deputy secretary mentioned. On a daily basis, we work with families like Fon and Kim Dockery, who lost their 8-year-old daughter to unsafe firearm storage practices. We work with families like Baker Burleson, whose son was saved because he practiced safe firearm storage practices. These are the type of stories that we share to go along with the tools that we give out, which are the firearm locks, to amplify this message. If one single life is saved,

this campaign will be justified, and we're doing exactly that every day. Every day. On a personal note, I'm a proud father of a 2-year-old baby boy, and I'm a proud firearm owner. This campaign's personal to me because I have to practice what I preach as a firearm owner and practice safe storage. I don't want my means of protection being used to harm someone that I love. I want my firearm to stay in the right hands: mine.

Kirsten: Thank you both for providing those examples. Billy, I'm going to give you this next one, as well. How does NC S.A.F.E. align with the mission of the Department Public Safety? I know you touched on that a little bit, but, um, anything else to add to that?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Yeah. I mean, it—it—it really falls right in line with the—the mission of the Department of Public Safety. This is what we do. W—we try to make safer communities across the state of North Carolina through, you know, planning and protection and preparedness, um, and prevention. That's really what this campaign's all about. We're trying to prevent, um, incidents from occurring in the first place by not allowing access to firearms that are, um, to people that should not have them: young children and to, um, felons in our community.

We're trying to make sure that people are prepared to make the right decision by thinking through exactly what it is that they need to do in their house to keep them and their family safe. And so, um, a lot of times people just don't know the tools or haven't thought about safe storage, so we want to make sure that we're

drawing it to their attention, that they have a plan; if they—if they want to become a firearm owner, that they have a plan of how they're going to safely store that firearm in their house. So, it falls right into the—the—the mission of what we're trying to do. I think everybody that, um, works in public safety knows that adding a firearm to—to the mix when a criminal activity is—is—is occurring, it ups the—the ante for everybody in that situation. And so, we want to make sure that all folks, um, across the state of North Carolina have access to this information, so that they can prevent these types of incidents occurring in their communities.

Kirsten: Jared, what are the top tips that you can provide for gun owners to store their firearms safely?

Jared: The first tip I will say is simple. Secure your firearms. Whether that's using a—a—a gun lock like we give out, a trigger lock, a safe or a vault, secure your firearms safely. Try to use a code that's not simple enough that a five- or six-year-old will understand. 1-2-3-4 is not safe firearm storage. Hiding a gun in a cabinet or at the top of your closet, under a bed, is not safe firearm storage. We respect your constitutional right to have a gun, but it com—with that comes a profound responsibility to keep it safe.

Think about it simply as, you know, we're riding our bike, we put on a helmet. We get in the car, we put on our seatbelt. We carry our guns as we're going out

to the range or we're concealed carrying or when we're getting in our cars, we need to lock it up. Keep it safe every single time.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter:

And I—I would just add that, you know, this campaign, we really focused on cable locks. Um, that's the easiest and least expensive method that you can use to—to secure a firearm. The *best* method is to store it, when you have it at your home, in a—in a safe because that is the most secure method of—of doing it. We're starting with gun locks because we can't afford to buy a—a—a gun safe for everybody in the state of North Carolina. I wish we could. But in addition to using those trigger locks or those cable locks, locking up in a safe would be a—would be the next step that people can take. The other—another step that they could take is separating the ammunition from the gun, not leaving it loaded in that gun safe, um, so that if someone were to get access to it, that it wouldn't be easy just to, um, use it immediately. So, those are additional steps that w—we recommend for people.

And sometimes we get the question, “Well, I want to be able to use it. If someone breaks into my home, I want to be able to use my gun quickly. I want to make sure that I have access to it quickly.” So, there are new, um, safes that are available now that are biometrically controlled where you can use a fingerprint or your voice to open the safe, um, and those can open almost instantaneously, and you can still have access, quick access, to that firearm if you would need it in an emergency. And so, that is not an excuse that people should be using anymore. There's really no excuse not to do the right thing

here. And so, we really try to encourage people to—to look at the best practice. Best practice is the safe. The gun lock is definitely necessary and a—and a first good step, and that's what we're trying to get people to take the first intermediate step, and then taking the long-term step of taking the—the additional step of—of—of putting it in a gun safe.

Kirsten: Something that you said really stuck out to me. You said there's—there's no excuse anymore because lives are at stake. Jared, I'm going to start this one with you, as well. Um, some parents may be nervous to have conversations about firearms. Do you have any advice about taking that first step to covering this topic at home or wherever they are?

Jared: Yeah, just have the conversation. Um, be the first one. Step out on faith. Have that conversation. It may not be your child's life that's impacted by this conversation, but some child in your community could be impacted. You could be saving the child's life, and it's fairly simple. We can have a conversation with the deputy secretary today.

Um, hey, Billy, I'm looking forward to having Christian come over to your house for the birthday party next Friday, man. We're—we're excited about it.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Absolutely, we're looking forward to having him over.

Jared: You know, Christian has some allergies. He's allergic to nuts and to, uh, shell-shellfish, so [unintelligible] watch out for that for me.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Okay, no problem, of course. I—I...thank you for bringing that to my attention. I'm glad that you let me know about that.

Jared: Another thing me and the wife want to—want to ask, we always ask all the parents, is if you have any firearms in the home, and if you do, are they stored safely? You know, you never can be too safe with these kids.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Hey, I—I really appreciate you asking that question, and we do. We absolutely lock up our firearms in our—in our—our safe at home.

Jared: Man, I appreciate it. Looking forward to coming over Friday.

And it's—it's that simple. Being the first to trust, stepping out on faith, having that conversation, it is so important. And we at NC S.A.F.E., we're advocates for it, we're going to push for it and we encourage parents to normalize that conversation.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: An-and I'll just add, I mean, gun control is obviously a political issue, and so a lot of people are scared to have that conversation, but it doesn't have to be a political issue. Um, safety is the way that we—we approach this topic. And so, just like you would ask, uh, those—those questions about the allergies that Jared

brought up in the conversation, it's the same type of conversation that you should be bringing up with, uh, other family members that you may let your kids go... If it's the grandparents, if it's your aunts and uncles that the—the kids are going to spend the night with, having that conversation is just as important as those other things you would bring up that are important for your child, if it's medicines that they take or whatever, uh, to make sure that they're going to be safe in that—that location. Make it a non-partisan issue by just making it just a safety conversation.

Jared: And I'll be honest, even if you don't own a firearm, you, too, can participate in having this conversation. "Hey, do you have a gun in your home? Is it locked up? Is it stored safely?" You don't have to be a gun owner to talk about safe firearm storage.

Kirsten: Mm-hmm. And I think you guys essentially just wrote a script for everyone. If someone feels nervous and wants to practice, uh, listen to what, uh, Billy and Jared just went through. It's a couple sentences and could be a—just a really easy conversation to open up with your friends and neighbors. So, Billy, what's next for NC S.A.F.E.? Um, any upcoming events or initiatives? I know you talked about, uh, things that happened in 2024, so what's in the cards for 2025?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Yeah, so we're doing a lot of, uh, new initiatives, um, in the state right now with NC S.A.F.E. One is that we're focusing on schools, and it's important to have this conversation with schools and trying to get parents through the Parent Teacher

Associations. And so, um, what we're focusing on is NC S.A.F.E. for schools, and what that's going to do is—look at can we get the messaging into student handbooks, um, about, um, about the reason why it's important to safely store our firearm at home, so a kid doesn't end up bringing that gun to school. Last year in the state of North Carolina, we had 86 guns taken off of kids at school. You want to talk about a situation that terrorizes a full school campus and ends education for the day? Have a child bring a gun to school.

They may have been just bringing it to show it off. They may have been bringing it because they wanted to protect themselves. Doesn't matter. A 5-year-old, a 6-year-old, a 10-year-old should not be bringing a gun to school. It's a parent's responsibility to make sure that doesn't happen. Of those 86 guns that came on school campuses last year, 75% of them came from the kid's own home. We all have a responsibility as a parent—as parents to make sure that those guns don't get into the hands of those kids and bring them to school. So, we're—we're working on that campaign with, um, with NC S.A.F.E. right now to go into our school buildings across the state and have those conversations with parents about making sure that those guns don't come on—on school campuses.

We're going to have a—a week of action again this year. It's going to be the first week of June, and we'd love for any of our partners in DPS to partner with us on—on this campaign. We'll be distributing gun locks during that week, doing community-based events to get this messaging out across the state of North Carolina. So, that will be that first week of June. We're hopefully going to be

going to, uh, the fair again. We're trying to do the Western Fair up in Asheville, uh, this year, also, so we got lots of, uh, good events that are coming up.

But we also are partnering with, uh, community-based, um... We—we have, in Juvenile Justice, we have what are called Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils, and they're in all 100 counties across the state of North Carolina. So, we're trying to partner with all of those JCPCs across the state of North Carolina to have community-based events in their areas, um, to have these conversations and to really involve people that are stakeholders to this campaign, meaning you're a gun owner. If you go to the gun range, we're trying to reach out to gun ranges to—to have this educational material. If you're a concealed carry instructor, we're trying to get this messaging out to concealed c—, um, carry instructors so that they can spread this information to people that come to their classes. So, lots of—of—of opportunities in the next year to really spread this message across the state of North Carolina.

As Jared said, already we've given out 120,000 locks. That means that there's a lot of people that are interested in—in using these locks, which is great. Um, we know in the state of North Carolina, on—on—the last survey that we did, 50% of gun owners said that they didn't safely store their firearms in their house. And so, 42% of all households have a firearm in the state of North Carolina. So, 50% of those households right now are not safely storing it. The goal of this campaign is to reduce that 50% down to zero one day, but we know that that's

going to take constant messaging and constant reminders to make sure that people make the right decision not one time but every time...

Jared: Every time!

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: ...that—that they lock up that firearm.

Jared: Absolutely. We are going to be in your neighborhood. We are in every single county through our JCPCs, as the deputy secretary mentioned. We're going to be doing a lot of conferences. You can check us out at the NC Safe Kids Conference, North Carolina ASRO Conference. Uh, we're also going to be at the local ball games. We're at the Winston-Salem Dash, the Fayetteville Woodpeckers. We're going to possibly hit some festivals throughout the year, and of course, we're looking at the Western State Fair, as well. Uh, so, let us know if you'd like to partner with us. Uh, feel free to hit us up at info@ncsafe.org, info@ncsafe.org. Check out our website which is ncsafe.org, and follow us on socials. We're on Facebook, X (now), and Instagram.

Kirsten: It's apparent that you both are very passionate about this extremely important issue throughout North Carolina. Um, anything else that you want to add, any shout outs, uh, and with partnerships, Jared?

Jared: I appreciate it, thank you so much. So, I want to give a shout out to all of our existing partners to encourage you that we're always seeking new partnerships

to work with us and collaborate with NC S.A.F.E. Uh, truly, we cannot do this alone. We work with everyone, from our partners in the medical field, from pediatricians, uh, to folks on prevention, like, uh, in Cumberland County, Cape Fear Valley Health Trauma Services; Atrium Health; to folks even like local municipalities, local governments. But I want to encourage you, if you have a church, a synagogue, a civic group, anyone out there who wants to partner with us, let us know: info@ncsafe.org. Anyone! We'll partner with anyone as long as you have a heart and a passion to share this information. Check us out: ncsafe.org. Thank you.

Kirsten: Thank you both.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Thank you.

Jared: I appreciate it.

Kirsten: To learn more about NC S.A.F.E. or for media requests, reach out via email to the North Carolina Department of Public Safety at ncsafe@ncdps.gov. Gun safety starts with you. Lock it up. Keep it secure. Keep everyone safe. Resources for schools, parents, advocates and partners are available at ncsafe.org. You can also sign up to participate in or host an event through the website. Don't forget the NC S.A.F.E. week of action is June 1st through the 7th.

Conclusion

[Pause]

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Kirsten: This is the Safety Scoop, a podcast written, produced and edited by the NCDPS communications team. The mission of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety is to safeguard and preserve the lives and property of the people of North Carolina through preparation, prevention and protection with integrity and honor. Follow the department on social media for a closer look at ongoing initiatives and resources. We're on Facebook, X and Instagram at NC Public Safety. If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to subscribe to the Safety Scoop on your favorite podcast app. I'm your host, Kirsten Barber. Thanks for listening.

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