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Aimed at Suicide Prevention, VA Shares Winners of Its ‘Gun Safety Matters Challenge’

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently selected three winners in its [Gun Safety Matters Challenge](#), an open-innovation contest to develop cost-effective solutions for firearm storage, which Veterans and their families or friends could use to prevent suicide, injury or accidents.

With solutions from private industry and academia, as well as talented individuals who care deeply about preventing suicide and enhancing firearm safety, VA is working with winners of the challenge to learn more about their innovations.

The following individuals were officially announced as winners of VA’s Gun Safety Matters Challenge:

- First place winner: Barret Schlegelmilch, of the Leaders for Global Operations Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for the DuoBox, which is a mechanical device that provides an inexpensive, secure and reliable means of weapon storage, and encourages responsible weapon access with two people present.
- Second place winners: Timothy Oh, Christine Tate and Jorel Lalicki of Vara Corp. for the VARA Firearm Security Response, an "open-environment" biometric safe that revolutionizes access time to a securely locked firearm. Fingerprint authentication and other features allow total control over specifying user access for firearm owners and family members.
- Third place winners: Kathleen Gilligan and Leslie Bodi for the Sentinel, which is a mobile application that helps Veterans connect with their peers using an innovative "buddy system," so in a crisis, they know they are not alone. Sentinel can also control Bluetooth-enabled gun lock boxes, and includes unique features, such as a time-lock and automated emergency calling.

“Suicide prevention is everyone’s responsibility,” said VA’s Acting Secretary Peter O’Rourke. “The [Gun Safety Matters Challenge](#) is an innovative example of how VA is continuing to address Veterans’ needs through strategic partnerships with community and federal strategic partners.”

In 2015, roughly 67 percent of all Veteran deaths by suicide were the result of firearm injuries. Compared with their age-matched civilian peers, both male and female Veterans have an increased risk for suicide.

“Suicide is a serious and preventable public health problem, and research suggests that most suicidal crises pass within minutes to hours,” said Dr. Carolyn Clancy, executive in charge of VA’s Veterans Health Administration. “Through innovation and invention, if these ideas can build time and space between the impulse to attempt suicide and the ability to do so, for just a few hours, we will save lives.”

More information about the open innovation challenge can be found at <https://ninesights.ninesigma.com/web/gun-safety-matters>.

For more information about VA mental health services, visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov.

Veterans in crisis or having thoughts of suicide — and those who know a Veteran in crisis — should call the Veterans Crisis Line for confidential support 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. Call 800-273-8255 and press 1, chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat, or text to 838255.

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