

EAST METRO

Ramsey County gives out free gun locks to prevent accidental shootings by children

With accidental shootings on the rise, the devices will be distributed at 11 sites.

By Chao Xiong (<http://www.startribune.com/chao-xiong/10646266/>) Star Tribune |

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Ramsey County authorities are giving away free gun locks at several community sites in hopes of putting a stop to dangerous child gun play that has killed or maimed children locally and across the country.

Children's access to guns is unacceptable, and it has reached unimaginable proportions, County Attorney John Choi said at a news conference Thursday. So far this year, his office said, more than 242 children under age 12 have been killed or injured in accidental shootings across the country. Twenty-three of those cases involved toddlers.

"All of these incidents are preventable," Choi said. "Let's not have any more tragic events in our community."

The program was prompted by a 2012 case in which St. Paul resident Lue Xiong's 9-year-old son accidentally shot his 2-year-old brother in the head, nearly killing her. Choi said the boy, now 6, is leading a "normal" life. Xiong could not be reached for comment.

State court records show that the number of cases filed across Minnesota for negligent storage of a firearm where a child can gain access to it has jumped from one in 2006 to 32 last year, the most for that nine-year period.

The presence of a child or injury to a child aren't required for charging the count if a gun is left where children are known to visit.

In 2014, authorities charged a St. Paul man who left a loaded semiautomatic handgun in the bathroom of a Maplewood McDonald's. In 2015, a Minneapolis man who had been drinking was charged with leaving a loaded handgun in an Apple Valley restaurant and a Crystal man was charged with leaving a loaded gun in the bathroom of a Golden Valley Menards store.

Cases like these and one in 2012 in Minneapolis in which a 4-year-old boy fatally shot his 2-year-old brother, Neengco Xiong, grab headlines, but many other children are injured in Minnesota by gun play.

In December 2013, a 15-year-old St. Paul boy accidentally shot and injured his friend in the stomach with a .22-caliber rifle that was stored loaded in the family's basement to control raccoons that had attacked their dogs. The boy, arrested at his school the next day, had just moved into the home, which belonged to his mother's boyfriend.

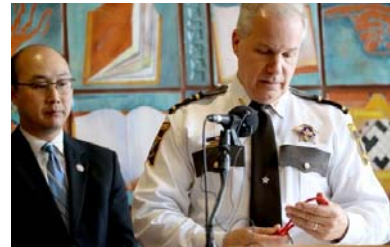
"He did not load the gun and thought the safety was on when he pulled the trigger," according to court documents.

Studies have shown that parents often don't realize that their children have handled their guns, said Joan Brandt, Family Health Division manager with St. Paul-Ramsey County Public Health.

"Parents underestimate the extent to which their child knows where guns are kept in the house — and how to access those guns, and overestimate their child's maturity and gun safety knowledge and skills," Brandt said.

Choi's office is partnering with the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office, St. Paul-Ramsey County Public Health and community groups to give out 2,500 gun locks purchased by the county attorney's office at a total discounted price of \$3,400. The locks normally would retail for \$3 to \$5 apiece.

A key element of the program is providing the locks — no questions asked — at 11 sites across Ramsey County absent the presence of law enforcement officers, including the Rondo Community Outreach Library, Hmong American Partnership, Hallie Q. Brown



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_14655239393343)
DAVID JOLIS

Ramsey County Sheriff Matt Bostrom held one of the gun locks while County Attorney John Choi looked on, at left.

Community Center, and the Paul and Sheila Wellstone Center for Community Building in St. Paul, and Ramsey County libraries in Roseville and Shoreview, among other locations.

Jonathan Palmer, executive director of the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, said it's "essential" that the gun locks be distributed at such locations. "These are places that are natural gathering places for the community," Palmer said. "We have a lot of people who come through our site who fear intervention" by law enforcement officers.

Community partners said participating in the program was an easy "yes," because gun violence is a public health issue, and community centers and libraries provide a range of public services.

"It's so clearly about children's and adults' safety — families' safety," said Jane Eastwood, director of the St. Paul Public Libraries. "I didn't even really have any qualms about it. That seems like a really good thing to do, and a valuable community service."

The gun locks will be stored behind a desk or counter, and they will be distributed to residents who request one. Each person is limited to two or three locks per visit; the locks will come with a pamphlet with safety tips.

Choi and Sheriff Matt Bostrom said they would consider continuing the program if this first run is successful. For more information on where to obtain a gun lock, safety tips and instructional videos, visit the county attorney's website at: www.ramseycounty.us/gun-safety.

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