

FIREARM SAFETY VALUE  
NEUTRAL PLAN

Department of Natural Resources  
Division of Enforcement

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### VALUE NEUTRAL FIREARM SAFETY PROGRAM

The 1995 Legislature charged the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources with developing a plan for a firearm safety program directed at children that is value-neutral regarding firearm ownership. This plan is in addition to the mandated Youth Firearm Safety Program found in Minnesota Statute section 97B.015.

The plan was to address a program that was value-neutral concerning firearm ownership but that promoted the awareness and understanding of the safe use and storage of firearms.

In response to the legislative charge, the department adopted a methodology that involved examining existing firearm safety related programs as the quickest most cost effective way to achieve the desired outcome. The department examined six programs:

- DNR Youth Firearm safety Program
- National Rifle Association Shooting Courses
- Daisy / Jaycee BB Shooters Program
- 4H Shooting Sports Program
- School Liaison Officer Program
- Eddie Eagle Program

While all the programs provided some level of safety education, other factors judged to be essential to the success of this type of program were lacking in most of them:

- Most of the programs were advocacy programs and could not be considered value-neutral.
- Some of the programs were targeted at an age of youngsters that might have already formed opinions about firearm ownership (either for or against) that might have affected the basic safety message.

The only program to meet the requirements of the legislative charge was the Eddie Eagle Program. The program is value-neutral concerning firearms ownership. It provides safety information at a variety of age levels so it is the most versatile of the programs examined. It reaches the appropriate age group of youngsters in a manner that they can readily accept without advocating any position.

The department recommends the Eddie Eagle Program as the best means to provide value-neutral safety education to youngsters.

The program can be provided in one of two ways:

1. Offering it to school districts on a statewide basis for inclusion into existing curriculum.
2. Offering it in a pilot status to two school districts, one metropolitan and one outstate, for two years to establish the program's efficacy. Following the study period, a decision could be reached concerning how or whether to proceed with the program.

There are a variety of gun safety courses available to the citizens of Minnesota. Some programs are based in gun safety, some in competition, and others deal with hunting and hunting techniques. Some deal with children, some with adults.

In reviewing these programs, it is the recommendation of the Department of Natural Resources to adopt and use the NRA Eddie Eagle program as a pilot program in both a metropolitan and a rural school district. After two years, the pilot program would be re-evaluated for success.

The Eddie Eagle program meets the needs for teaching children gun safety and is value neutral on firearms ownership.

## VALUE-NEUTRAL FIREARMS SAFETY PROGRAM

The 1995 Minnesota Legislature charged the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources with the responsibility of developing a plan for a firearms safety program directed at children that is value neutral concerning firearm ownership. The charge appeared in Chapter 1 (1st Special Session - 1995) and stated:

“The commissioner of natural resources shall develop a plan for the establishment of a firearms safety program directed at children that is value-neutral concerning firearms ownership, but that promotes awareness and understanding of the safe use and storage of firearms. The commissioner shall submit the plan and any necessary enabling legislation to the legislature by February 1, 1996.”

### METHODOLOGY

Rather than undertake the development of an entirely new program to meet the legislative charge, it seemed prudent to examine existing programs to determine if any of them met the requirements of the charge. Several existing programs were examined from the following perspectives:

1. Neutrality on the subject of firearms ownership
2. Level of safety education provided
3. Age of the intended audience.

Also of concern in examining existing programs was their availability across the state or the ease of making them available across the state.

The department was concerned about the age at which youngsters form their opinions about firearm ownership. It appears likely that youngsters form those opinions at a fairly young age based, at least in part, on the opinions of their parents and older siblings. Any program designed to provide basic safety and storage information concerning firearms has a better chance of succeeding if it reaches youngsters while they are forming their opinions on firearms. Thus, it was also of concern that the program be flexible in its age range by appealing to a broad range of ages rather than targeting a particular age group.

### EXISTING PROGRAMS and ANALYSIS

1. **DNR Firearm Safety Program**
  - Began in 1955;
  - 22,085 students trained in 1995;

- Over 775,000 students trained to date;
- 4,100 active volunteers;
- 3 fatal hunting accidents - 1995;
- 38 non-fatal hunting accidents - 1995;
- Age group targeted: 11-15 years of age;
- Percentage of metro 12 year olds trained in the last five (5) years: 15.8%;
- Percentage of outstate 12 year olds trained in the last five (5) years: 45.8%
- Program content:
  - **Firearm Safety** - the student will learn the three rules of firearm safety, learn how gun accidents happen, learn how to safely carry a firearm, understand safe shooting zones, demonstrate basic marksmanship and shooting fundamentals, and learn how to safely clean and store firearms.
  - **Hunter Ethics and Responsibility** - the student will learn about the privileges of citizens of this state in regard to hunting, will learn the “hunter code of ethics”, will learn about irresponsible hunters and how they negatively affect all hunters, and will learn tips for responsible shooting.
  - **History** - the student will learn about hunting and firearms heritage and history in this country.
  - **Survival** - the student will learn how to use a compass and map; basic survival rules of how to build a fire, how to stay dry, how to avoid hypothermia, first aid, rescue signals, basic water safety, and cold weather survival.
  - **Wildlife Management** - the student will study the history of wildlife management including learning about carrying capacity, animal population cycles, and the future of wildlife populations.
  - **Wildlife Identification** - the student will learn identification characteristics and wildlife habitat. This will help the student to categorize large mammals, small mammals, upland birds, waterfowl, and rare, protected, or endangered species.
  - **Game Care** - the student will learn how dirt, heat, and moisture will spoil

their game after it is taken. The student will learn how to properly field dress both big and small game.

The current DNR Firearm Safety program teaches students between the ages of 11 and 15, the basic principles of firearm safety, hunter ethics and responsibility, history of firearms, survival, wildlife management, wildlife identification, and game care. The course consists of a minimum of 12 hours of training including classroom and range activities. The range activities feature gun handling and live firing which requires a level of physical development and maturity for the participants not generally possessed by youngsters until they are 11 years of age.

Although the current firearm safety program is value-neutral on the issue of gun ownership and does promote safe gun handling, it does not accept children at a young enough age to comply with the legislative charge. Minnesota Statute section 97B.015 provides that only children 11 years of age and above may participate in the program. It has, in fact, been structured to the reading age and maturity level of 11 year old students.

## 2. NRA Shooting Courses

- Age 8 to 80
- Based on five components:
  - **Instruction** - Firearms safety, gun handling and basic skills are covered in a basic course. This introduction to shooting provides the knowledge and skills necessary for participation in other shooting activities.
  - **Qualification Shooting** - Qualification shooting provides the basis of regular participation. Participants earn awards as they achieve progressively harder scores.
  - **Informal Competition** - In the comfortable atmosphere of the home range, participants broaden their shooting skills, gain the experience of competition and learn sportsmanship by participating in leagues and/or postal matches.
  - **Tournament Competition** - Often organized as the finale of a program, formal tournaments give shooters an opportunity to test their abilities and to receive meaningful recognition for their accomplishment.
  - **Special Activities** - Special activities are events or projects designed to add to the educational value and enjoyment of the overall shooting experience. They can be conducted throughout the shooting season. These activities may include:

*Leadership Activities* - enable young people to learn about conducting a shooting program and play an active role in the administration of their shooting program. Experience gained will carry over into other areas of life.

*Educational Activities* - include seminars on various elements of the shooting sports, field trips, films, and guest lecturers.

*Social Activities* - for the fun of it! Parties, picnics, banquets, and social gatherings are a welcome part of the schedule and help establish an important base for participants to work together successfully on other projects.

*Service Activities* - build ties with the local community which are an integral function of a youth program. Open houses and volunteerism in community projects generate goodwill and teach participants an important lesson about community involvement.

The broad range of NRA shooting courses provide safety and shooting education but cannot be considered to be value-neutral because of the strong emphasis on shooting as a sport. While they provide a good overall safety education across a broad age range, they do not meet the criteria required by the legislative charge.

### **3. Daisy/Jaycee BB Gun Shooters Program**

- Began in 1948 to promote BB gun shooting competition.
- Age group 8 to 12.
- Based in teaching gun safety, firearm familiarization and competitive shooting by age group. Local, regional, state, and national competitions designed to teach shooting skills, efficiency, and competition shooting. Some gun safety rules discussed.

The Daisy BB Gun Program provides some education safe gun handling and is targeted at a young age group. It cannot be said to be value-neutral regarding firearms ownership because it is an advocacy program designed to promote shooting sports. There are questions about the level of availability of this program on a statewide basis. It does not meet the requirements of legislative charge.

### **4. 4-H Shooting Sports Program**

- Age group 8 to 19.

- Directed at rural/agricultural schools.
- Includes competition shooting by age group in air rifle, archery, muzzleloader, shotgun, and small bore rifle.
- The program goals are to:
  - Develop responsible sportsmanship;
  - Gain appreciation of a broad spectrum of shooting sports;
  - Develop shooting knowledge and skills;
  - Become aware of related career opportunities;
  - Gain in-depth experience in all areas of interest;
  - Gain enjoyable, positive relationships with adults and peers.

This program provides the opportunity for primarily rural youngsters to engage in organized shooting opportunities. It does provide some level of safety education but is not primarily concerned with home storage and safety. The emphasis on shooting sports, career opportunities, and development of relationships cannot be said to be value-neutral regarding firearms ownership. This program does not meet the requirements of the legislative charge.

#### **5. School Liaison Officer Program**

- Elementary schools, secondary schools.
- Based in conflict resolution, team building.
- Sub program - weapons program that identifies violent kids in need. Usually done by referral. One-on-one counseling with officer. Not available throughout state. Does not meet need because it is not value-neutral on gun ownership.

This program is designed as an intervention program for high risk youngsters. It is very valuable in the correct context but does not meet the requirements of the legislative charge. It deals with firearms in association with violence / crime. It does not concentrate upon safety or storage and cannot be viewed as value-neutral regarding firearms.

#### **6. Eddie Eagle Program (NRA)**

- Gun accident-prevention program directed at children pre-kindergarten through 6th grade. It teaches a simple safety message so they know what to do when they come upon an unsecured firearm. **“STOP! DON’T TOUCH! LEAVE THE AREA! TELL AN ADULT”**
- Program content



- Level 1.**      Preschool through first grade. Includes a motivational “big book” written in an easy-to-understand rhyme.
- Level 2.**      Grades 2-3. Uses simple activity books to reinforce Eddie’s safety message.
- Level 3.**      Grades 4-6. Includes activity books designed for older children.

**All three levels include:**

- Instructor’s Program and Discussion Guide
- Seven minute animated VHS video, hosted by TV star Jason Priestley.
- Reproducibles
- Eddie Eagle poster
- Audio cassette that teaches the Eddie Eagle Shuffle
- Rewards for students
- Parent letter

Since 1988, the Eddie Eagle Program has reached over 7 million children through 1,500 law enforcement agencies, 5,000 schools, and numerous civic groups.

The program is neutral concerning firearm ownership. It explains what you should do to be safe if you come upon a firearm. It doesn’t talk about the reasons why people should or shouldn’t have guns. The program discusses the reality of firearms (pretend vs. real life) in terms appropriate to the age level of the youngsters. It also stresses the safety and home storage lessons critical to responsible firearms ownership.

- The program is easily integrated into a variety of educational settings. It can be easily integrated into the following curriculum areas:
  - **Health/Safety:** Personal safety standards. Discussion of safe and unsafe situations involving firearms.
  - **Citizenship:** It teaches that students are responsible for their own actions and that students should be good role models.
  - **Reading/ Language Arts:** It develops oral communication skills by means of discussion and sharing.  
  
It helps develop good written communication skills by encouraging students to write or dictate the program lessons learned.

It encourages students to read books or stories that carry a gun safety theme.

The program is sponsored by the National Rifle Association but does not recruit NRA members. It is, in fact, difficult to determine the NRA connection to the program. It does not deal with current political issues centering around firearm ownership or usage.

## **DISCUSSION**

All the programs currently offered in Minnesota satisfy some component of the charge given to the commissioner of natural resources by the Legislature. Basic firearm safety information is present in almost all programs of this type. Very few however also deal with home storage of firearms, a concern that is of increasing importance as the media makes us aware of the number of home accidents involving firearms.

Many of the available programs are centered in an advocacy role to promote shooting sports and cannot be viewed as value-neutral regarding firearm ownership. One available program deals with "at risk youth" and the violence that can be created if firearms are misused. In today's firearm conscious society, it would be unusual not to find programs taking a "position" regarding firearms, either for or against.

Several programs reach students at an age when their attitude toward firearm ownership has probably already been decided or strongly influenced by parents or older siblings causing a safety-based value-neutral program to "compete" with that value system. A value-neutral program would be best received by students if it reached them before it had to compete with an "in place" attitude (either for or against firearms).

## **CONCLUSION**

Of the six programs evaluated, only the Eddie Eagle Program fulfills the requirements of the legislative charge. The program provides basic safety information to youngsters at the appropriate level for them to absorb it. It is structured to reach various age groups so that it is far more versatile than other programs. The age appropriate structuring of materials allows the program to reach youngsters at the earliest possible age and instill the basic safety message.

The program is value-neutral and does not try to advocate a position on firearms ownership or use. This may be difficult for some people to accept because the program was developed and is sponsored by the National Rifle Association, a firearm advocacy group. The emotional climate around firearm ownership and use should not detract from the fact that the program teaches a basic safety and responsibility message regarding firearms without proselytizing for any position. The message is expressed in simple straight forward lessons that highlight safety and ignore emotional or political messages.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The methodology adopted for determining a means to provide a value-neutral firearm safety program to Minnesota placed a premium on evaluating existing programs for suitability rather than creating a new program. This method is more cost effective, quicker, and capitalizes on work already performed, provided a program exists that meets all the needs of the legislative charge.

After a review of existing programs, the Department of Natural Resources believes that the Eddie Eagle Program meets the needs of the charge given to the commissioner of natural resources by the 1995 Legislature.

The program could be provided by one of two possible options:

Statewide The program could be offered, under DNR sponsorship, to all school districts in the state. Each school district would have to determine whether they desired to use a program of this type and how to best incorporate it into existing curriculum. There would undoubtedly be some level of resistance to providing basic firearm safety education as part of the regular school curriculum given the high emotional feeling that surrounds any discussion of firearms. Not all school districts would recognize or accept the need to provide this type of safety education.

or,

Pilot Basis The program could be provided to one metropolitan and one outstate school district on a voluntary basis for two years to establish its efficacy and acceptance. It could be delivered by means of the Adopt-A-School program currently functioning within the Enforcement Division. Materials could be provided by conservation officers who could also serve as resource persons for administrators and teachers.

Following a two-year pilot period, the program could be evaluated by school district administrators, teachers, local law enforcement agencies, DNR enforcement, students and the legislature. Based upon this evaluation, a decision could be made whether to expand the program, modify the program, evaluate another method / program, or eliminate the program.