



# Safety Shorts

## General Safety, Highway, & Law Enforcement

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### **GENERAL SAFETY**

**By Chad Engle, Loss Prevention and Safety Manager**

### **Money for Minutes: Start the Year Strong!**

Happy New Year to all our NIRMA member friends! As we close the books on 2025 and look ahead to the opportunities of 2026, it's the perfect time to give your safety efforts a fresh boost—starting with the Money for Minutes program.

Each year, this program rewards safety committees that stay engaged, stay consistent, and stay committed to reducing risk in their county or agency. In 2025, participating committees could receive part of \$7,000 in total to be awarded, including:

- Nine (9) \$500 awards drawn from qualifying committees
- One \$2,500 Super Award recognizing the committee that demonstrates exceptional dedication to safety and loss prevention—especially through the use of NIRMA's *Best Safety Practices for Members*

To qualify, your safety committee simply needs to:

1. Meet once each quarter
2. Review all incidents and events from the previous quarter
3. Identify practical ways to prevent similar events in the future
4. Submit your committee minutes with those recommendations

The deadline to submit 2025 meeting minutes is January 31, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. Central. You can email them directly to me at [chad@nirma.info](mailto:chad@nirma.info).

### **Get Those 2026 Meetings on the Calendar Now**

One of the best ways to ensure all four quarterly meetings happen is to schedule them *at the start of the year* rather than trying to squeeze them in later. Committees that plan ahead rarely miss meetings—and more importantly, are the ones that make meaningful progress in reducing risk.

While I expect the Money for Minutes program to return in 2026, it is still subject to final budget approval. Even so, please continue to hold and document your meetings so your committee remains eligible the moment the continuation of the program is confirmed.

## Dig Into the “Why,” Not Just the “What”

When reviewing incidents, remember:

**Our goal isn’t just reporting what happened—that’s already part of the claims process.**

Safety committees add value by exploring why the event occurred and what actionable steps can prevent a repeat.

Try to move beyond recommendations like *“be more careful”* or *“be aware of your surroundings.”*

These don’t help the next employee doing the same task. Instead, focus on specific, risk-focused guidance such as:

- Adjusting workflows
- Improving equipment use
- Clarifying procedures
- Enhancing communication or signage
- Specific training
- Performance management
- Employee Development/mentoring

Clear, practical insights make a real difference.

## A Small Resolution With a Big Impact

As you step into the new year, I encourage every committee to increase its risk management and loss prevention efforts by just 10%. It’s a small, achievable step that can significantly impact your county or agency’s safety performance.

If you’d like help with committee development, meeting planning, or incident analysis, I’m here to assist. Reach out anytime at [chad@nirma.info](mailto:chad@nirma.info) or 1.800.642.6671.

Thank you for your continued commitment to protecting Nebraska’s counties and their employees. Wishing you a safe, successful, and prosperous 2026!

# **HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT**

**By K C Pawling, Road Safety and Loss Prevention Specialist**

## **Safe Chainsaw Use: Essential Tips for Operators**

Colder weather without snow translates into some ditch clearing activities for most counties. This usually involves cutting, shredding, or grubbing out trees and shrubs with many sizes of machines. One of the most effective and commonly used is the handheld chainsaw.

Chainsaws are powerful tools that make cutting and clearing tasks easier, but they also pose serious risks if not handled properly. Never work alone when using a chainsaw. The following safety guidelines can also help prevent injuries and ensure efficient operation.

### **1. Wear Proper Protective Gear**

- Helmet with face shield or safety goggles to protect against flying debris.
- Cut-resistant gloves for better grip and hand safety.
- Chainsaw chaps or pants to reduce leg injuries.
- Steel-toe boots for foot protection.
- Hearing protection, as chainsaws produce high noise levels.

### **2. Read the User's Manual and Inspect Your Chainsaw**

Check the chain tension, sharpness, and lubrication. Ensure all safety features—such as the chain brake and throttle lock—are functioning. Never operate a damaged or poorly maintained saw.

### **3. Use Correct Starting Procedures**

Start the chainsaw on level ground with the chain brake engaged. Use the manufacturer's recommended method—usually the foot-through-handle technique—to maintain control.

### **4. Maintain a Safe Stance**

Stand with feet shoulder-width apart and keep a firm grip with both hands. Always cut below shoulder height and avoid overreaching.

### **5. Watch for Kickback**

Kickback occurs when the chain's upper tip contacts an object. To reduce risk:

- Hold the saw firmly with both hands.
- Use a chainsaw equipped with a low-kickback chain and functioning chain brake.
- Avoid cutting with the tip of the bar.

### **6. Plan Your Cuts**

Clear the work area of obstacles and ensure no one is within your safety zone (at least

twice the length of the tree or limb you're cutting). Anticipate how the wood will move when cut to avoid pinching the bar.

A part of planning your cut is to have a route of escape when felling trees. Make sure your route is free of any tripping hazards or fellow employees.

## **7. Shut Down Safely**

Engage the chain brake before setting the saw down. Turn off the engine when moving between cuts or carrying the saw. Never refuel a hot saw, allow the saw to cool before adding fuel. This also gives your body a little break which helps you avoid over-exerting yourself.

Bottom Line: Chainsaws demand respect and caution. By wearing proper gear, inspecting equipment, and following safe operating practices, you can minimize risks and work efficiently.

If you need to get a training scheduled, you can contact me via email at [kcpawling@nirma.info](mailto:kcpawling@nirma.info) or phone at 402-310-4417.

**Let's start the year with a focus on safety!**

# **LAW ENFORCEMENT AND CORRECTIONS**

**By Todd Duncan, Law Enforcement and Safety Specialist**

## **Law Enforcement Canine Programs: Managing Risk and Upholding Professional Standards**

Law enforcement canine programs are invaluable assets in public safety, providing enhanced capabilities in detection, tracking, apprehension, and community engagement. However, they also carry significant operational and legal risks that demand strict adherence to certification standards, constitutional limitations, and best practices in training and policy development.

### **Nebraska Certification and Training Requirements**

Under Title 79 of the Nebraska Administrative Code, law enforcement canine handlers and their dogs must complete an approved certification process through the Nebraska Police Standards Advisory Council (NPSC). Certification ensures that teams meet state standards for obedience, control, scent work, and use of force performance. Annual recertification and ongoing in-service training are essential for maintaining proficiency and ensuring that canines remain reliable tools, not liabilities, in law enforcement operations. Furthermore, documentation of all training sessions and deployments must be maintained to support legal defensibility and program accountability.

### **Use of Force Considerations**

The deployment of a law enforcement canine constitutes a use of force under the Fourth Amendment, governed by the "objective reasonableness" standard established in *Graham v. Connor* (490 U.S. 386, 1989). The Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, which makes decisions that are legally binding in Nebraska, has held that improper or prolonged canine bites can constitute excessive force (*Kuha v. City of Minnetonka*, 365 F.3d 590 (8th Cir. 2004)). Nebraska courts similarly emphasize that handlers must balance the need to apprehend suspects with the potential for injury to the individual and the public (*Frazier v. Douglas County*, No. 8:18-cv-00160, 2020 WL 11039200, at 11-12 (D. Neb. Oct. 20, 2020)). Agencies must ensure that all canine deployments are justified by articulable facts, proportionate to the threat, and terminated once compliance or control is achieved. Detailed after-action reporting and supervisory review are also critical in demonstrating compliance with constitutional standards.

### **Safety Considerations On and Off Duty**

Canine safety extends beyond the field. Handlers must take precautions to prevent accidental bites or escapes that could endanger the public, fellow deputies, or family members. Secure housing, controlled socialization, and clear off-duty handling protocols, such as restricting public access to the canine without supervision, are essential. Vehicles equipped for safe transport, climate monitoring systems, and emergency response plans for canine distress further reduce risks.

### **Policy, Training, and Risk Mitigation**

An up-to-date, legally vetted canine policy is the foundation of a sound program. It should address certification, use of force thresholds, deployment authorization, reporting, and post-incident review. Regular scenario-based training, including low-light searches, passive suspect encounters, and bite disengagement, reinforces judgment and control under stress.

Incorporating de-escalation principles and verbal warning mandates further align canine operations with modern law enforcement standards.

Agencies should also engage in periodic external audits, require continuing education for handlers, and participate in national professional associations such as North American Police Work Dog Association (NAPWDA) or the United States Police Canine Association (USPCA). These steps not only improve operational performance but also demonstrate commitment to professionalism and accountability.

## **Conclusion**

A well-managed law enforcement canine program is built on the pillars of certification, sound policy, accountability, and continual training. When agencies adhere to Nebraska's certification requirements, comply with constitutional use of force standards, and proactively manage safety both on and off duty, they protect not only their communities, but also their deputies, canines, and the county as a whole.

***NIRMA Member Officials, Supervisors, and Managers:***

***Have a human resource question or issue? Contact NIRMA's Human Resources Helpline at (866) 896-6423.***

***Have a non-HR legal question or issue? Contact NIRMA's Legal Link at (402) 742-9240 or by email at [legallink@nirma.info](mailto:legallink@nirma.info)***

**Stay professional. Stay accountable. Protect the badge.**