



Safety Shorts

General Safety, Highway, & Law Enforcement

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July is UV Safety Awareness Month

Spending time outside is a great way to be physically active and reduce stress. You can work and play outside without raising your skin cancer risk by protecting your skin from the sun. Most skin cancers are caused by too much exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light. UV rays are an invisible kind of radiation that comes from the sun, tanning beds, and sunlamps. UV rays can damage skin cells.

Protection from UV rays is important all year, not just during the summer. UV rays can reach you on cloudy and cool days, and they reflect off of surfaces like water, cement, sand, and snow. In the continental United States, UV rays tend to be strongest from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daylight saving time (9 a.m. to 3 p.m. standard time).

The [UV Index](#) forecasts the strength of UV rays each day. If the UV index is 3 or higher in your area, protect your skin from too much exposure to the sun. For more information: [UV SAFETY MONTH \(nationaltoday.com\)](#)

GENERAL SAFETY

By Chad Engle, Loss Prevention and Safety Manager

Driving Defensively this Summer: Protecting County Assets and Lives

Summer in Nebraska means open roads, family vacations, and increased activity. For county governments, however, it also signals a heightened risk on the roadways. NIRMA understands these risks intimately. In fact, **car crashes stand as NIRMA's number one loss leader**, underscoring the critical importance of defensive driving, especially during these busy summer months.

The warmer weather and longer days bring a unique set of challenges to our roads. More recreational drivers, often unfamiliar with local routes, share the highways. An increase in pedestrian traffic, and other types of traffic (motorcycles, farm equipment, ATVs, bicycles), particularly with children out of school, demands heightened awareness. Road construction projects proliferate, creating detours, lane closures, and unexpected hazards. Add to this the potential for impaired driving during holiday celebrations and the increased risk of driver fatigue on long trips, and the recipe for motor vehicle crashes becomes clear.

These summertime factors directly contribute to the very incidents that drive NIRMA's losses. Every crash, no matter how minor, impacts county resources – from vehicle repairs and increased cost of coverages to potential workers' compensation claims and, most importantly, the human cost of injuries and fatalities.

This is where defensive driving becomes not just a good idea, but a vital necessity for everyone. Defensive driving is about proactively anticipating and reacting to potential hazards. It's about making the correct choices when driving. It's about taking personal responsibility for safety on the road, protecting not only yourself and your passengers but also the valuable assets and reputation of your county.

Here are some key defensive driving principles particularly relevant for summer travel:

- **Eliminate Distractions:** With more to see and do, the temptation to multitask while driving increases. Put away phones, avoid eating or grooming, and keep your focus squarely on the road.
- **Maintain Safe Following Distances:** Summer traffic can be unpredictable. Allowing ample space between your vehicle and the one in front provides crucial reaction time, especially when encountering sudden stops or erratic driving from other motorists.
- **Anticipate Others' Actions:** Assume other drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists may make mistakes. Be prepared for unexpected lane changes, sudden stops, or individuals stepping into the road. Look twice and then look again.
- **Adjust to Conditions:** Summer weather can change rapidly, bringing sudden downpours, strong winds, or even sun glare. Adjust your speed and driving habits accordingly.
- **Practice Patience:** Traffic delays due to construction or increased volume are inevitable. Plan extra time for your journeys and resist the urge to speed or drive aggressively. Road rage benefits no one and significantly increases accident risk.
- **Ensure Vehicle Readiness:** Hot weather puts extra strain on vehicles. Regularly check tires for proper inflation, inspect fluid levels, and ensure your vehicle is functional and safe to operate. A breakdown can put you in a dangerous situation.
- **Stay Rested and Sober:** Drowsy driving is as dangerous as impaired driving. Get adequate rest before long trips and never drive under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- **Wear your seatbelt and require everyone else in your vehicle to do the same!**

By embracing these defensive driving habits, we all can significantly reduce the risk of being involved in a crash. This not only safeguards personal well-being but also directly contributes to NIRMA's mission of effective risk management, ultimately protecting the financial health and operational continuity of our member counties and related agencies. As always, I can be reached at chad@nirma.info and 1.800.642.6671.

HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT

By K C Pawling, Road Safety and Loss Prevention Specialist

Change, It Can Be a Hot Topic!

Change, not many people like it, but no one can live without it. I think every county worker in the history of dirt has heard the phrase, "this is the way we've always done it, why change now?" While this is NOT an article about changing the standard operating procedures of the county road department, it is about a necessary change, acclimation. What is acclimation, you ask? Well, let's talk about it.

The acclimation that I am speaking about is acclimating to a hot weather work environment, especially if you're transitioning from a cooler environment. This change requires a strategic approach to help your body adapt safely and effectively. Here are some **best practices** to follow:

1. Gradual Heat Exposure

- **Start slow:** Begin with short periods of work in the heat (30–60 minutes) and gradually increase over 1–2 weeks.
- **Follow the 20% rule:** Increase exposure by no more than 20% per day for employees not used to working outside.
- For employees with experience working outside, the duration periods can be longer and more frequent. For example, 50% of the usual duration on the first day, 60% on the second day, 80% on the third day and 100% on the fourth day.
- Gradual exposure can also be done by beginning your day outside of the air conditioning as early as possible. Your body will change with the rising temperature throughout the day.

2. Stay Hydrated

- Drink water often: Aim for 1 cup (8 oz) every 15–20 minutes.
- Start drinking water early, preferably BEFORE work begins. Get ahead of dehydration but also do not stop after work has ended. Keep drinking until your activity level has decreased at the end of the day.
- Avoid caffeine and sugary drinks during your workday; they can dehydrate you.
- Electrolytes: Use sports drinks or electrolyte tablets if you are sweating heavily.
- Make cool water access easy, provide coolers that can be used to carry water to the job site.

3. Dress Appropriately

- Wear light-colored, loose-fitting, and breathable clothing.
- Use UV-protective gear and wide-brimmed hats if working outdoors.

4. Listen to Your Body

- Watch for signs of heat exhaustion: dizziness, nausea, headache, rapid heartbeat.
- Take breaks in shade or air-conditioned areas.
- Use the buddy system to watch each other for heat stress.

5. Improve Physical Fitness

- A fitter body adapts more efficiently to heat.
- Incorporate cardiovascular training and hydration habits into your routine.

6. Time Your Work Wisely

- Schedule the most strenuous tasks during cooler parts of the day (early morning or late afternoon).
- Some counties start an hour earlier during the summer, for example, work from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.
- Rotate tasks to limit prolonged heat exposure.

7. Use Cooling Strategies

- Use cooling towels, fans, or ice packs during breaks.
- Consider cooling vests for prolonged outdoor work.

In summary, you may not be able to put all 7 of the strategies listed above into play. That's understandable but do your best to implement as many as you can. Reach out to your managers and have the necessary conversations. If your department has a safety committee, this is a terrific opportunity for them to act and make a difference. If I can be of any help, let me know. I can be reached at kcpawling@nirma.info or 402-310-4417.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND CORRECTIONS

By Todd Duncan, Law Enforcement and Safety Specialist

Managing Risk in Property and Evidence Handling: A Critical Function in Law Enforcement

The management of property and evidence in law enforcement can seem like a mundane task, but in reality, it is a high-liability area that demands precision, accountability, and integrity. Improper handling can result in lost or tampered evidence, compromised prosecutions, civil liability, and damage to public trust. Agencies must implement robust procedures to ensure the chain of custody is preserved and that all items, especially high-risk items like drugs, firearms, and cash, are secured with the highest standards of control.

Key Risks in Property and Evidence Management

The risks associated with property and evidence management typically fall into the following five areas:

1. Chain of Custody Breakdowns – Failure to maintain an accurate, documented chain of custody can jeopardize criminal cases. This is a common issue, particularly in smaller agencies. One example is the practice of multiple officers having ongoing access to a shared locked storage area containing evidence from different officers/cases. This practice is fraught with problems, will likely not stand up to chain of custody challenges in court, and can compromise case prosecution.
2. Theft or Misappropriation – Poor controls can lead to internal theft or misuse of seized property, particularly cash, narcotics, and firearms.
3. Storage Failures – Inadequate security, environmental controls, or inventory systems can result in loss or contamination.
4. Legal Challenges and Civil Liability – Lost or mishandled evidence can lead to wrongful prosecutions, acquittals, or lawsuits.
5. Firearm Safety Hazards – Improper handling or unsecured firearms in evidence can pose a direct safety threat to staff. Lack of specific procedures for releasing firearms can also expose agencies to significant liability.

Risk Management Strategies

To mitigate risk and ensure the integrity of property and evidence, the following steps should be followed:

- **Written Policy:** Develop and implement a comprehensive property and evidence policy. Model policies are available through NIRMA.
- **Strict Access Controls:** Limit access to the evidence room to trained, authorized personnel only. Use secure electronic access logs. Install security cameras in and around property/evidence storage areas and retain recordings according to your county policy (we recommend retention of video for at least 90 days, and it must be extracted and retained longer if there is any reason to think the video could be evidence of officer misconduct).
- **Organized Inventory Systems:** Implement manual or digital intake and tracking processes to reduce human error and improve auditability.

- **Regular Audits and Inventories:** Conduct quarterly audits and annual inventories, including surprise inspections by command staff or an outside agency. Audits should include the inspection of a random sampling of items to verify their presence, condition, quantity (in the case of drugs and money), etc.
- **Chain of Custody Documentation:** Every transfer or access event, i.e. officers checking items out for court, should be documented with time, date, and personnel signatures.
- **Training and Certification:** Assign trained evidence technicians and ensure ongoing certification in evidence handling best practices. The International Association of Property and Evidence (IAPE) offers in-person and online training as well as free resources such as sample property and evidence procedure manuals. For more information, see the IAPE website at <https://welcome.iape.org/>

Handling High-Risk Items

Maintaining the integrity and security of property and evidence is important in every case, but certain items, such as cash, firearms, and drugs, require extra precautions. The following procedures can reduce the heightened risk inherent to storing the following types of property/evidence:

- **Cash:** Count and verify all currency in the presence of two staff members. Immediately seal cash in tamper-evident packaging with documentation. Store in a dual-lock safe within the evidence room. Avoid storing cash long-term; seek court approval for early forfeiture or deposit.
- **Firearms:** All firearms must be rendered safe (unloaded, magazine removed, chamber cleared) before submission. Use trigger locks or secure containers. Store firearms separately from ammunition, in a locked, secure firearm vault with restricted access.
- **Drugs and Narcotics:** Package drugs in sealed, tamper-evident bags and document weight. Store in a secure narcotics locker or vault. Dispose of adjudicated narcotics under witnessed, documented procedures, in compliance with DEA guidelines.

Conclusion

Sound property and evidence management is not just an administrative task, it's a foundational aspect of lawful, professional law enforcement. Agencies that implement strict controls, maintain transparency, and commit to best practices not only protect the integrity of their cases but also the reputation of the entire agency. Risk mitigation in this area is essential to justice, officer safety, and public trust.

For questions or more information on training opportunities, contact NIRMA's Law Enforcement and Safety Specialist Todd Duncan at (402) 742-9220 or tduncan@nirma.info.

***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***