



SAFETY SHORTS

General Safety • Highway Departments • Law Enforcement & Corrections

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ROAD/HIGHWAY DEPARTMENTS

By: KC Pawling, NIRMA Road Safety and Loss Prevention Specialist

Do You See What I See?

Most county road employees know the rules. We know when to wear PPE, how to set up traffic control, and what procedures to follow when operating equipment.

But here's a question worth thinking about: **Can you recognize a hazard before it becomes a problem?**

That's where situational awareness comes in. Knowing the policy is one thing. Recognizing when a hazard exists is another. Think about a typical workday. You're focused on the task at hand when weather conditions begin to change. The wind picks up. Dark clouds move in. Visibility starts decreasing. You know the procedures for working in bad weather, but if you don't notice the warning signs, you may not realize conditions are becoming unsafe until it's too late.

The same is true with equipment. Most operators know they should report damaged equipment. But are you noticing the hydraulic leak that's getting worse? The unusual vibration? The squeak that's getting a little louder every day? Hazards rarely appear without warning. More often, they develop gradually and give us clues that something isn't right. Situational awareness means paying attention to those clues.

It also applies when working around contractors. Maybe a traffic control device isn't where it should be. Maybe workers are working outside the protected work area. Maybe someone isn't wearing the required PPE. Even if it's not your crew, recognizing and addressing unsafe conditions helps protect everyone on the job site. Remember that our counties are responsible for ALL work activity on our county roads, including contractors.

A coworker who seems distracted, forgets routine tasks, or struggles to stay focused may be showing signs of fatigue or are they a diabetic having a reaction to changing blood sugar levels. Recognizing those warning signs and getting to know our staff/coworkers can help prevent a serious incident before it

happens. Another example of this I have personally experienced, is your coworker allergic to bee stings? This is something that is good to know BEFORE encountering any bees hiding out in signposts.

A good habit to develop is simply asking yourself: **"What's changed since I started this job?"**

Conditions on road projects are constantly changing. Traffic changes. Weather changes. Equipment conditions change and even the employees working on the project can change from day to day. But the safest employees are the ones who stay alert and continually reassess their surroundings and are aware of their coworkers.

At the end of the day, most incidents don't happen because someone didn't know the rule. They happen because a developing hazard wasn't recognized in time. So, keep your head up, pay attention to what's happening around you, and trust your instincts when something doesn't look right. Train on this topic. Talk about it, not everyone has the same levels of awareness and some of it cannot be taught, but a good majority can be. **Knowing the rules is important. Recognizing the hazard is what prevents the injury.**

Safety Meeting Discussion

Ask your crew: **"Can you think of a time when you noticed a hazard before it caused a problem? What warning signs helped you recognize it?"** The answers may provide valuable lessons for everyone on the team. It may also help your management team identify some holes in your county safety training program.

If you need a training scheduled, or just simply want help developing or improving your safety and training program, you can contact me via email at kcpawling@nirma.info or phone at 402-310-4417.

LAW ENFORCEMENT/CORRECTIONS

By: Todd Duncan, NIRMA Law Enforcement and Safety Specialist

“Suspicious” Does Not Always Equal Reasonable Suspicion: Terry Stops, Frisks, and the Fourth Amendment

Calls for service about a “suspicious person” are common in law enforcement. They can justify a deputy responding, observing, asking questions, and investigating. But a suspicious person call does not automatically justify detaining or frisking someone.

THE RISK

A common mistake is believing a deputy may detain someone simply because the deputy is “conducting a lawful investigation.” The investigation may be lawful, but the detention still requires independent Fourth Amendment justification.

THE RULE

Under the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Terry v. Ohio*, 392 U.S. 1 (1968), a deputy may briefly detain a person only when the deputy has reasonable, articulable suspicion that the person is involved in criminal activity. A hunch, unusual behavior, presence in a high crime area, or a caller's characterization of someone as “suspicious” is not enough by itself.

Nebraska state statute on this subject says: “A peace officer may stop any person in a public place whom he reasonably suspects of committing, who has committed, or who is about to commit a crime and may demand of him his name, address, and an explanation of his actions.” (NRS 29-829)

However, before detaining someone, deputies should be able to answer two questions:

1. “What specific facts make me reasonably suspect this person has committed, is committing, or is about to commit a crime?”
2. “What law or statute do I reasonably suspect this person has violated, is violating, or is about to violate?” It's this second question that sometimes gets overlooked.

If the deputy cannot articulate the facts and connect those facts to suspected criminal activity, i.e. an actual crime or law violation, the deputy should generally continue the investigation through observation or a consensual encounter, rather than detention. To summarize:

- Consensual encounter: No reasonable suspicion is required. Deputies may approach, ask questions, and request identification, as long as the person remains free to decline and leave.
- Investigative detention: Requires specific, articulable facts that establish reasonable suspicion of criminal activity.
- Frisk: A lawful stop does not automatically authorize a frisk. The deputy must also reasonably suspect that the person is armed and dangerous. A Terry frisk is a limited protective search for weapons, not a search for evidence.

WHY IT MATTERS

Once a deputy restrains a person's freedom of movement through physical force or a show of authority to which the person submits, a Fourth Amendment seizure has occurred. If reasonable suspicion was lacking, the detention may be unconstitutional, potentially resulting in suppression of evidence, civil litigation under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, and avoidable liability for the deputy and agency.

THE TAKEAWAY

Suspicion brings you to the scene. Reasonable suspicion permits the detention. Reasonable suspicion that the person is armed and dangerous permits the frisk.

When in doubt, deputies can often continue investigating through observation, gathering additional information from the initial caller, and consensual conversation until sufficient facts develop to justify detention.

Stay professional. Stay accountable. Protect the badge.

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

GENERAL SAFETY

By: Chad Engle, Loss Prevention Manager and Safety Specialist

Key Control: A Simple But Effective Security Measure

When we talk about protecting county assets, the conversation often centers on cybersecurity. Employees receive regular reminders about phishing scams, ransomware attacks, and protecting sensitive information. While those threats are real and growing, it's important not to overlook a much older security risk: unauthorized physical access.

Theft, burglary, and unauthorized entry remain common crimes in communities of all sizes. According to statistics published by the Lincoln Police Department, hundreds of vehicle thefts, burglaries, and thefts from vehicles were reported during 2025. While larger communities may experience higher crime rates, county officials know that these incidents can occur anywhere, from a rural road department shop to a courthouse parking lot.

Physical security is a critical component of every county's loss prevention strategy. Fencing, surveillance systems, access control systems, and other security measures can help protect facilities and equipment, but these solutions often require significant investment and ongoing maintenance. One of the simplest, most cost-effective security measures available is also one of the most overlooked: key control.

Why Key Control Matters

Every key issued by a county represents access to public property, sensitive information, vehicles, equipment, or restricted areas. Without proper controls, a lost, stolen, duplicated, or forgotten key can create significant security vulnerabilities.

A well-designed key control program helps:

- Protect employees and the public
- Reduce opportunities for theft and vandalism
- Prevent unauthorized access to facilities and equipment
- Maintain accountability for county-owned assets
- Reduce costs associated with emergency lock changes and security incidents

Simply put, if you do not know who has your keys, you do not know who has access to your property.

Elements of an Effective Key Control Policy

A formal key control policy does not have to be complicated, but it should clearly define responsibilities and expectations.

1. Establish Ownership and Authority

All physical keys and electronic access credentials should remain the property of the county. The policy should clearly identify who is authorized to issue, track, recover, and approve duplicate keys. Unauthorized key duplication should be strictly prohibited.

2. Follow the Principle of Least Privilege

Employees should receive only the keys necessary to perform their job duties. Limiting access reduces security risks and improves accountability. Consider establishing a hierarchy of access levels, ranging from individual room keys to master keys.

3. Create Clear Issuance Procedures

Every key issued should be documented. A formal approval process and a signed acknowledgement form help ensure employees understand their responsibilities. Whether using a paper log or an electronic tracking system, counties should maintain an accurate record of who possesses each key.

4. Define Employee Responsibilities

Employees should understand that keys are not to be shared, loaned, or transferred to others. Keys should remain in the possession of the authorized employee and be secured when not in use.

5. Require Immediate Reporting of Lost Keys

A lost key can quickly become a security issue. Policies should require employees to report missing keys immediately, or at a minimum within 24 hours. Prompt reporting allows county officials to assess the risk and determine whether additional security measures, such as rekeying locks, are necessary.

6. Make Key Return Part of Offboarding

Employee departures, retirements, and transfers should trigger a key recovery process. Every county's separation checklist should include the return of all keys, badges, and access devices before employment ends.

7. Conduct Periodic Audits

An annual or semi-annual inventory helps verify that issued keys remain in the possession of authorized individuals. Regular audits often uncover missing keys, outdated records, or opportunities to improve security practices before a loss occurs.

Common Key Control Mistakes

Even organizations with written policies sometimes create unnecessary security risks through everyday habits. Avoid these common mistakes:

- ✗ Labeling keys with building names, room numbers, or specific functions
- ✗ Leaving keys unattended on desks or in unlocked areas
- ✗ Leaving keys in vehicles or equipment, fake rocks, flowerpots, or other predictable hiding places
- ✗ Keeping backup keys in unlocked drawers or filing cabinets

- ✗ Allowing employees to loan keys to coworkers or contractors
- ✗ Failing to collect keys when an employee leaves the organization

Small Effort, Big Impact

Effective key control does not require a major investment, yet it can significantly strengthen a county's overall security program. By establishing clear procedures, maintaining accountability, and regularly auditing key inventories, counties can reduce risk and better protect their people, facilities, vehicles, and equipment.

In loss prevention, success is often found in the basics. Knowing who has the keys may seem like a small detail, but it can make a big difference when it comes to preventing theft, unauthorized access, and costly security incidents.

Consider using your next Safety Committee meeting to review current key control practices. You may be surprised by how many keys are unaccounted for or how many employees still have access they no longer need. A simple audit today can prevent a costly problem tomorrow.