

WHERE SAFETY & STORY MEET

From Scratches to Safety

AN OSHA-INFORMED GUIDE FOR PET SITTERS & DOG WALKERS

A practical companion for recognizing hazards, strengthening safeguards, and building safer mobile pet-care operations.

Field Notes for Pet Pros

Pet Sitter Safety System™

Companion guide to the From Scratches to Safety presentation. Educational resource; not legal advice. Adapt to your operation and jurisdiction.

START HERE

You Already Have a Safety System

Most pet-care businesses did not begin with a formal safety program. They began with trust, experience, good judgment, client instructions, training, and people figuring out how to get the work done.

As the business grows, more decisions happen when the owner is not standing there: at doors, on walks, in client homes, around reactive animals, during medication tasks, in bad weather, and between visits.

That means safety is already part of the operation — whether anyone has called it a safety system or not.

Where are you protected by a real safeguard, and where are you still relying on “be careful”?

The Safety Reality Check is designed to help answer that question. It looks at hazard awareness, field decision-making, safeguards, training, communication, leadership, and accountability.

- What is clearly in place?
- What is informal or inconsistent?
- What still depends on memory, luck, experience, or individual heroics?

Protecting people is part of protecting pets.

THE OSHA-INFORMED VIEW

OSHA Gives Us a Different Lens

Pet sitting does not look like a factory floor. But workers still encounter foreseeable hazards in real homes, real neighborhoods, real weather, real traffic, and real animal-behavior situations.

Animal behavior	Driving & roadside exposure
Slips, trips & falls	Severe weather
Chemicals & medications	Unsafe properties
Lone work	Violence & emergencies

The useful question is not “Does pet sitting look industrial?” It is “What hazards can reasonably be anticipated in this work, and what are we doing to reduce the exposure?”

Professional safety practice adds another layer: identify the hazard, assess the risk, choose safeguards, and verify that they actually work.

You may discover that your company already does much of this. You simply have never called it safety management.

SAFETY REALITY CHECK

Start With What You Think You Know

The Safety Reality Check is a starting point. It is not an inspection, a compliance audit, or a verdict on whether you run a “safe” or “unsafe” company.

It captures what leadership believes is currently in place.

- Do we identify high-risk pets and homes before service begins?
- Do workers know when they can pause, modify, or stop a visit?
- Are near misses treated as useful information?
- Does training happen before higher-risk work is performed alone?
- Do our safeguards work under actual field conditions?
- Are we relying on experienced sitters simply “knowing what to do”?

A score is a baseline belief — not proof.

A high score does not mean there is nothing left to learn. A low score does not mean the business is careless. It gives you a place to begin.

What do we believe about our current safety system?

Now we go look.

HAZARD RECOGNITION

Reported Hazards vs. Revealed Hazards

Some hazards are easy to recognize because someone has already named them.

REPORTED	REVEALED
• Documented bite history • Icy front steps • Broken garage keypad	• Door managed with one foot while controlling two dogs • Medication change buried in a text thread • Schedule pressure makes stopping feel impossible

The Hazard Recognition exercise asks you to report one condition you have encountered — even something you have always considered “just part of the job.”

One report is a story. Repeated reports become data.

Data can expose the parts of work that everyone has quietly learned to accommodate.

WORK-AS-DONE

Pay Attention to the Workaround

Pet sitters are excellent adaptive problem-solvers. The lock fails — they find another entrance. The dog refuses the normal routine — they change tactics. The weather turns — they improvise. The client instructions do not match reality — they figure something out.

The work gets completed. From the outside, that can look like a successful system.

Sometimes it is actually a successful worker compensating for a weak system.

Human and Organizational Performance (HOP) asks us to understand the context surrounding those decisions. The National Safety Council SIF model incorporates principles including that context influences behavior, workers adapt to conditions, blame does not improve systems, and learning drives improvement.

- Why was the workaround necessary?
- Would another worker recognize the same problem?
- Did the workaround reduce risk — or merely keep the work moving?
- Has the workaround quietly become the normal procedure?

A workaround is not automatically bad. But it is always information.

FROM STORIES TO DATA

Look for Patterns, Not Just Incidents

A single entry in a hazard log tells you what happened once. Several similar entries tell you something about the system.

What keeps happening? Where? Under what conditions?

Frequency tells you what workers encounter most often. But frequency alone does not establish priority.

Some conditions have characteristics that can make the potential outcome much more serious. Those are risk amplifiers.

- Working alone
- Poor lighting
- Time pressure
- Unfamiliar animals
- Extreme temperatures
- Communication failures
- Changing conditions
- Inexperience or inadequate support

The goal is not simply to count problems. It is to identify which combinations deserve attention first.

Patterns are data. Context tells you what the data means.

STOP-WORK AUTHORITY

Sometimes the Safest Action Is a Pause

Stop-work authority does not mean abandoning the client. It means workers have permission to pause when conditions change, assess what is happening, communicate, and determine the safest way to proceed.

- A dog becomes unexpectedly aggressive.
- A carbon-monoxide alarm activates.
- The sitter cannot safely enter the property.
- Medication instructions conflict.
- Ice makes the normal entrance unsafe.
- Someone appears at the home who was not expected to be there.

PAUSE → ASSESS → COMMUNICATE → PROCEED SAFELY

The question becomes: do we want the worker improvising alone, or do we want a defined decision process?

Without a clear pause-and-assess pathway, the individual sitter can become the last — and sometimes only — safeguard left in the system.

YOUR PSW26 TOOLKIT

Use the Right Tool for the Problem

Not every hazard needs another giant SOP. Sometimes you need a specific tool that helps the business see, learn, decide, or respond.

TOOL	WHAT IT HELPS YOU DO
Safety Reality Check	Establish a leadership baseline.
Hazard Recognition & Hazard Log	Capture conditions and recurring patterns.
HazCom / SDS Starter Pack	Understand chemical hazards and where to find handling and emergency information.
Incident & Near-Miss Tools	Record what happened, review it, and prevent recurrence.
OSHA Recordkeeping Resources	Distinguish first aid, recordable cases, and reportable events.
Stop-Work Guidance	Give workers a defined pathway when conditions change.

The purpose of the toolkit is not paperwork. It is a better way to see, learn, decide, and respond.

Toolkit home: fieldnotes4petpros.com/psw26

PLAN • DO • CHECK • ACT

Safety Is a Feedback Loop

The National Safety Council SIF Prevention Model uses the familiar Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. You do not need to become a safety professional to use the logic.

PLAN	What do we believe is happening? What systems do we already have? Where might the gaps be?
DO	Look at the work. Identify hazards. Understand risk. Choose or strengthen safeguards.
CHECK	Did the safeguard actually work? Do workers use it? Did the hazard return? What does the field data tell us?
ACT	Improve the system. Share what was learned. Track the change. Then look again.

**YOUR FIRST JOB IS NOT TO WRITE ANOTHER POLICY.
YOUR FIRST JOB IS TO SEE THE WORK CLEARLY.**

Choose one foreseeable hazard. Find out how the work is really being done. Identify what currently protects the worker. Ask whether that safeguard is reliable. Improve one thing. Then repeat.

That is how a safety system grows.

Framework note: This guide uses OSHA-informed hazard recognition concepts and the National Safety Council Serious Incident and Fatality (SIF) Prevention Model as a systems framework. It is educational and is not an OSHA publication or legal advice.

Sources: National Safety Council, Serious Incident and Fatality (SIF) Prevention Model and Guidebook (2025); OSHA standards and recordkeeping resources referenced in the From Scratches to Safety presentation.