

The new year is traditionally a time for reflection on the year that has passed and commitment to growth in the year to come. New Year's resolutions can address a wide range of personal development goals. I'd like to offer up a few safety themed recommendations for inclusion on your list of resolutions for 2026. These recommendations address three of the most common reasons people in Benton County seek out law enforcement services.

Drive like your life depends upon it. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that 39,345 people died on our nation's roadways in 2024. According to 2024 data from the State of Minnesota, 23,745 people were injured in vehicle crashes in just Minnesota alone. Operating a vehicle is one of the most hazardous things people do on a regular basis and one of the most frequent reasons people find themselves in need of public safety services when things have gone wrong. Modern vehicles do an amazing job of wrapping the driver in comfort and confidence, masking the hazards presented by the inescapable physics of moving 2 to 3 tons of steel at upwards of 70 mph. Most vehicle crashes happen due to human error. The top 5 contributing factors cited by law enforcement investigating vehicle crashes in Minnesota over the last 12 months were, following too close, failure to yield, failure to maintain lane of travel, improper turn or merge, and careless or negligent operation. Each one of these represent a moment in time when a driver made a poor decision or allowed their attention to drift from the task of driving. A safer 2026 starts with making good choices behind the wheel. Drive with care, pay attention to the road, put away distractions, and drive sober. Keep yourself focused on driving and be watchful for others on the road who might not be doing the same.

Secure your stuff. We are constantly struggling against the selfish urge within the criminal population to take things that don't belong to them. Theft is consistently one of the 5 most reported crimes to our office. The incidents of theft that affect average citizens are almost exclusively crimes of opportunity. These thefts occur because a criminal has gained access to property they want with little or no fear they will be caught. Think of money or valuables in an unlocked car, a remote outbuilding in a dark corner of the property that is unsecured, or a handbag left unattended in a shopping cart. Taking the simple steps of locking doors, lighting dark areas, and keeping valuables out of sight will deter a majority of thieves. For those looking to add additional layers of prevention, security systems and motion detection lights are great additions in and around your home. Active neighborhood watch groups play a key role in keeping communities safe. Knowing who your neighbors are and reporting suspicious activity to law enforcement right away are great steps to prevent theft. Examine your security habits and ask yourself, how easy would it be for someone to steal your valuables. Once you've identified exposed valuables, lock them up, light them up, or get them out of sight.

Become a skeptic. I don't wish to suggest you should change your general sunny disposition or your outlook on the Viking's Superbowl prospects. I'm referring to how to

react to ANY unsolicited contact you receive, regardless of who the contact claims to be. In our modern world, criminals devote countless hours to coming up with the next scheme to separate you from either your money or personal information. Historically, most of these attempts have been lazy, poorly constructed, or easily identified as scams. Increasingly, criminals are putting in considerable effort to make their scams sound and appear more legitimate. With every data breach or unethical company that sells your data, criminals are able to access an ever-broadening look into your life and habits. With this ill-gotten intelligence, criminals can craft more personalized and difficult to spot scams aimed at extracting from you money or more information. No matter who the unexpected text, email, or phone call claims to come from, be on your guard. Never click links, provide personal information, or provide payment to someone contacting you unexpectedly. This is especially true if the contact makes the situation sound urgent or is seeking payment in gift cards, wire transfer, or bitcoin. If you have any inkling the contact might be legitimate, independently find a telephone number or website for the organization the contact claims to be from and use the information you found to inquire if the contact is legitimate. Any legitimate organization should have no objections to this verification step. The proliferation of scams in the wild require all of us to assume any unsolicited contact is a scam until proven otherwise.

I wish you all the best in the new year. I hope that each of you reach the goals you have set, and I ask that you join us in resolving to make Benton County a safer place in 2026. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.