**Drive with NAR: The Safety Series**

**Are Real Estate Brokers Responsible for Their Agents’ Safety?**

CHRISTIAN BARNES

Look at those policies and procedures, and if they were written before 2020, you need to revise them and think about how you keep the people that you're not seeing on a daily basis. Safe.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Welcome to Drive With NAR: The Safety Series. I am Tracey Hawkins. Today's podcast we're talking about are brokers responsible for their agent safety. I am honored to have two great brokers with us today. First up is Christian Barnes. Christian is the president and CEO of Better Homes and Gardens Real Estate, Kansas City Homes here in the greater Kansas City area. Hi Christian.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

Hello, Tracy. Thank you so much for having me on. This is fabulous.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Next up is Lamont Breland. He is the CEO and the broker/owner of Breland Group Realtors in Louisville, Kentucky. He is a past president of the Kentucky Realtors Association, as well as the vice chair of the NAR Safety Advisory Committee. Hello Lamont.

LAMONT BRELAND

Hey, Tracey.

TRACEY HAWKINS

What I wanted to do first, I want you all to introduce yourself. So Christian, tell us a little bit about who you are and your role in the real estate world.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

Absolutely. So as you mentioned, I am currently present and owner at Better Homes and Gardens franchise here in Kansas City. We've got about 320 agents and six offices currently. I started as an agent. I'm a second generation agent. My line is I knew what a contingency was when I was five and how to spell it when I was seven. I grew up around real estate and started my career about 16 years ago as an agent and am proud now to have a leadership role in the brokerage and and leading these 300 plus agents.

TRACEY HAWKINS

And then Lamont, tell us your story.

LAMONT BRELAND

Yeah, here in Louisville, that's how we say it here in Kentucky. We've got an independent firm. I've got 53 agents, two offices. I've got two daughters that work with me. They're both licensed real estate agents. So that gives me a unique perspective when it comes to safety. I've been doing this for 36 years. Been local president, state president. I'm an NAR director currently, and as you said, I'm, currently vice chair of the NAR Realtor Safety Advisory Committee. So, yeah, I'm excited to be here and what an important topic.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Wonderful. Now we need to keep in mind that brokers are not legally required to provide any kind of safety training or resources for their agents. But with that in mind, I want each of you to tell me what you're doing right now in your business. What does safety look like in your company? Christian, we’ll start with you.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

We try our best to stay in front of it. In the broker owner world, you get hit with so many things and the agents get hit with so many more things every day from various resources. And I think as a broker owner, we've got a responsibility of making sure that our agents, while they're out doing all sorts of things on a daily basis and working with clients and customers and members of the public, that we're making sure that they've got safety in mind. I remember hearing you speak Tracey a couple years ago, and you absolutely opened my eyes to the importance of safety and that being that the real estate industry, it's one of the most dangerous professions. And I don't think that oftentimes we even think about that. I think many agents don't even think about that. It certainly isn't why we have people flooding into the industry. Safety runs the gamut from personal safety to online safety, safety with, as you know, the iteration of, of all these crazy AI tools. And it's something that's got to be constant and it really needs to be in the fabric of your brokerage.

TRACEY HAWKINS

I love that woven into the fabric and that's culture. So Lamont, you have a different perspective, especially being on that Safety Advisory Committee. What does safety look like in your organization?

LAMONT BRELAND

Having been on this committee for a couple years, but we get together in a room of 50 or 60 people, of course you get on committees because you've probably been impacted. We've got people that are on the safety committee. One of the agents had been raped at an open house. One had been, had one of her buddies on her team was murdered. I mean, it doesn't take long when you open up the conversation to realize that many people have been impacted, not to that degree, but many have been put in situations where they were afraid. And as you mentioned, you talked about crazy AI. I thought you were going to say crazy people. There's just a lot of predators out there and all of our stuff's online. You know, I've always heard the quote that we as agents, we meet strangers in vacant houses.

LAMONT BRELAND

That's just not a good recipe. And when you've got daughters in the business, you think about it all the time, every time they go out in the field. Now what do they say that cobbler's kids have no shoes. I can't say that I lead the nation in safety, but two or three years ago, it started to get on my radar. So we started to incorporate it into our policies and procedures. But who reads that, right? <laugh>, not many of the agents read policies and procedures, but we do point it out that it's a point of emphasis. Our state has a realtor safety pledge that's modeled after NAR’s safety pledge. And then we've just tried to be intentional with classes. Self-taught so far, just basically using PowerPoints from Janet Judd, who is a former NAR safety chair and retired police officer. There's just so many tools out there that you can use. You're not in it alone. You can go to the NAR safety page, all types of tools and resources, videos, as Christian said, just weave it into your monthly talks and emails. And so it sticks.

TRACEY HAWKINS

To build upon your point, Lamont, the job description of a real estate agent is that you make a living meeting complete strangers in empty houses and you make a living sitting in empty houses and you wait for strangers to walk in. And that is something that slowly but surely is going to change. And we know that the pandemic forced us to work in a virtual manner. So that's a step in the right direction. So let me be a nerd here and give you some numbers and get your thought. The NAR Member Safety Residential Report, and it's a great report. It should be required reading for everyone. It takes the temperature of what the perception of safety is in the industry. One of the numbers that struck me is that agents say that 51% of their brokerages have a safety plan or standard procedures in place. So what I want each of you to do is to talk to that 49% who don't, the 49% who for whatever reason think, eh, we don't need it, or we'll wait, we'll wait till something happens. Tell me your message for that 49% of your fellow brokers, managers, and owners who have nothing in place. Let's start with you, Christian.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

My one-liner to them would be, you're gonna wait and it's gonna be too late. I think oftentimes we are reactionary and we wait until something, something happens, something bad happens. And Tracey, I follow you on social media and I feel like weekly there's something that's happened in either a part of our country or part of the world that revolves around a real estate agent being put in, in a very dangerous situation. And it hopefully escaping that situation. But oftentimes it doesn't end like that. And I think as a broker owner, if you wait until something catastrophic happens with one of your agents, you're waiting too long. You've gotta get ahead of it. But there's too much writing on, on what we do on a day-to-day basis In our brokerage, we really talk about that work-life blend and balance. And as broker owners, you're trying to educate your agents.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

You're trying to make sure that they do the absolute best job that they can possibly do and achieve their goals. And they can't do it if they're put in one of these dangerous situations and God forbid are killed. We have to make sure that we're encompassing safety and the training for safety, not just in your policies and procedures, but you've gotta keep it front and center in all that they're doing. We do a great job of teaching them lead generation and how to work with buyers and how to work with sellers. And there's safety lessons in each of those. It can be, again, I'm gonna use that word woven into, but they can be woven into that. And you've gotta keep it top of mind for 'em, because I think a lot of people think safety. Eh, I've heard it. Been there, done it. You know, I went to a class 15 years ago and some guy, I talked about safety. I'm good. I've had the training,

TRACEY HAWKINS

I couldn't have said it better. My job is to keep people safe and the criminal's job is to find a way around that. Lamont, what is your message for those 49% of your fellow brokers, managers, and owners who aren't as vigilant about safety training as you are?

LAMONT BRELAND

I'm kind of surprised there's 51% that do it <laugh>, to be honest with you, because I think the average real estate company is, you know, Christian's got like a mega brokerage for the average, even mine at 53 is a big company because I think the average brokerage is like four people. I think that nationwide, the majority of the agents are with smaller companies. I would speak not only to the brokers, but to each agent. Take care of yourself. You know, don't count on your broker. We are kinda like parents, you know, as brokers, we, we love our agents. We, we want them to be safe, we want them to be successful. But you know, as you go into a changing market like this, you throw in all the, uh, the lead generation and buying leads and things like that, that's just asking for it. If you ask me, I mean, you know, some of the teams, they've got like five seconds to respond or it goes to the next person.

LAMONT BRELAND

So you jump on it and it sounds too good to be true. You start thinking, oh my gosh, they're looking at $600,000 house. What's that commission <laugh>? You're not thinking, wow, am I gonna put them in my app to run their background? Do I have time to do that? Am I gonna tell my partner over here that I'm headed out to this lead? I'll text you when I get there. Just thinking proactively about those things. It takes training and it takes diligence. You know, it's just one more thing you have to do. And the people that do these things are really good at it. They've been probably stalking you a little bit. They've been watching you, so you're really at a disadvantage. So I would just say as agents and brokers know that it happens. I was on a call earlier today and one of the ladies who's an NAR member, she was president-elect of the Beverly Carter Foundation. It'll be 10 years since that happened. And if our listeners don't know who Beverly Carter is, Google it, you know, like the foundation and get on there, and just learn about just an awesome real estate agent that, was just doing her job and got kidnapped and killed ultimately. And it happens so quick, you know, you're probably in it too deep before you know if you don't take those precautions. So I would just say take it seriously.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Excellent point. Bringing up that story, because I truly believe in lessons learned and every time I talk I'm talking about stories, stories of things that happen to agents. And the sad thing is the Beverly Carter story that's happened to more agents since Beverly Carter. And that's where the opportunity is lost. That's where the more the lessons are out there and amplified, the more agents learn that yes, it can happen to me, it happens to my fellow agents. And Lamont, you also mentioned speaking to a female agent. One thing that we have to know is that male agents are victimized as well. And so often this is often thought of as, the female agents, you know, let's get them training. The mindset is that male agents don't need it. Male agents need to hear the messages. Well, because of course I track these crimes and over the past two and a half years, most of the, the well-known crimes against real estate agents have been male agents.

TRACEY HAWKINS

And that ranges from robbery, assault, kidnapping, as well as murder. So all agents need to hear it. One thing that I also wanted to talk about is, again, the numbers. If 75% of the real estate agents who took that survey said that they feel better and more confident working after having some kind of safety class, why do you think that your fellow broker aren't at least offering some kind of safety class or at least strongly encouraging their agents to attend classes that their associations and boards have available? Christian, and it seems so easy to do, but it's not happening.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

It seems so easy to do, Tracy, but it's not a shiny object. <laugh>. You know, I think people roll their eyes when they think, oh, safety training, it's not that new shiny technology. It's not the new latest and greatest trend. I don't think most agents relate safety to how is it gonna help my business grow? And unfortunately I think a lot of them are after how they want the classes and the tools that are gonna help their business grow. And they don't view safety that way when actually it is one of the most important things in helping your business grow. You can't sell more if you're kidnapped and in somebody's trunk. We've got a responsibility too, not just to each other and our peers, but also to our clients. And I think it's huge when you can go in and sit belly to belly with a client and talk about the safety training that you've had as an agent. When you can talk to them about your protocols for doing an open house and the things that you do or don't do to make sure that not only you're staying safe, but you're also putting their safety and their family safety and their property in the forefront.

TRACEY HAWKINS

That perception, after I had a broker tell me, you know, Tracey, I'd love to have safety training, but agents will not show up for anything unless you're teaching them how to make more money. So that required a mind shift on my part as a safety educator and a content creator. So everything going forward had to be, Hey agents, you know, and again, we think it's the wild, wild west. The agents are out there on their own trying to decide which class to take. Do we take the safety class or the TikTok class or do we take the how to make a video class? So that's where the change occurred, that if you can meld the two. And that's what I tried to do, is to say, Hey, not only can you be safe, but here's how you can make it part of your business.

TRACEY HAWKINS

And like you said, Christian, when they talk to the consumer, the buyer or seller and they say, your safety is important and here's how I'm going to make sure you are safe while your house is on the market. Here's how I'm gonna make sure you're safe when you're looking for properties. Excellent, excellent point. Lamont, I want you to talk a little bit about how you convince the agents in your office that's safety training. And I know you have a lot of it, you've told us the variety of it. Can you talk to us about how you convinced them that even though it's not required, but you'd really like them to take the safety training and why it's important to your business as a broker, how it helps your liability issues.

LAMONT BRELAND

You can't sugarcoat this. You know, it's kind of like scared straight back in the day when it happens. It is really ugly. You're traumatized for life. It's not hard to go out and find evidence. I'm not gonna say evidence of success like we do when in sales, but evidence that is real, find six or eight different things that have happened and say, you know what, once a month I'm gonna send out a safety email and just say, this is what happened back in 2021 in Omaha. You know, or wherever. Invest the time because you can reuse those things. I mean, they don't time out. So one of the things that I did probably four years ago, I did it by accident. I do my best work by accident. I was at a rental, a vacant rental house. It was in between tenants and it was a cold dreary day.

LAMONT BRELAND

And I had my iPhone with me and I had my maintenance fellow with me. So I went around and I did a safety video around the house. It looked like an episode of cops sort of <laugh>. I had taken the window and made it a jar in the back. And I walked around the house and I showed them to always do a check of the property before you go in. And I said, okay, here's a cracked window, open window. So that's something to be concerned about. So anyway, long story short, I went through the house and gave them little tips and I opened up a closet door and my maintenance man just jumped out at me. And it was pretty traumatic. I showed it three weeks ago at a meeting and everybody in the room jumped. But it shows you how quickly things can happen when the bad guy has the advantage because they know the element of surprise. They know it's coming, but you don't. And in a vacant house by yourself, there's no way that could go good. So anyway, that was just one tool that I've had for four years that I can use once a year as we get new agents just to kind of show them what can happen.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Excellent. So let's talk about some of the tools that real estate agents can use and brokerages can provide it or associations provide it. Do either of you use Forewarn as a tool?

LAMONT BRELAND

Yes, absolutely.

TRACEY HAWKINS

How do you tell your agents that this is a tool and what it does and how they should use it?

LAMONT BRELAND

Well, I tell them the story that my wife and I were watching TV a few weeks ago, and there was a shooting where over 300 rounds were exchanged. My wife looked up and there was a picture of a fellow on there that was arrested, and she said, is that your HVAC guy? I looked up and I thought, oh my goodness, that was his name right up there. I put him in the Forewarn app too late. He had 12 prior convictions for everything from drugs to robbery to, you know, shame on me. He is been in my daughter's house, countless of our client's houses. He is reliable and he is fairly inexpensive. I just never thought about putting the number of a vendor in there, but we use it all the time. It's a free member benefit for our association. Not all associations offer it, but it is a very effective tool. But it's not always accurate. So anytime you have a tool, don't count on just that trust but verify, I guess I would say. But if you put the phone number in there and it comes up, it's questionable, definitely it takes someone with you or just turn down the appointment.

TRACEY HAWKINS

And to, to be clear, n a r does not recommend or endorse any safety tool or product. You can go to the n a website at n.realtor/safety to find some resources. But what I believe in are layers, layers of safety. Uh, one layer is safe practices training. That means you learn what to do, what not to do. And that's especially important for new agents or agents who've been in the field and who don't think about safety. Another is tools like forewarn where you can take a phone number or a name and then you can do a search and you can find out if there are any criminal convictions. Now, to your point, Lamont, it's not the be all end all because there may be those criminals who haven't been convicted yet. So you can't just get comfortable because it doesn't show convictions. But do understand how it works.

TRACEY HAWKINS

It will give you a background check, it will give you a financial check so that you can make sure they're actually qualified to work with you and to see the properties that you're going to show them, and it will confirm their identity. So be familiar with the tool, know its limitations. And another is weapons. Again, NAR does not have a policy. I think proper training is the key. So whatever your weapon, whether it's pepper spray, which is always the number one according to that Member Residential Safety Report, pepper spray is one, followed by firearms. Whatever tool you choose, as long as you practice and you are familiar with it and you have it accessible and you're willing to use it, I think that's a good choice as long as you're comfortable. But you also made an excellent point that we already are born with the best tool, and that's intuition.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Now, with this great responsibility on your shoulders, we need to know what's the most misunderstood concept about safety in the industry. Every single brokerage should have a safety committee, and there needs to be someone from all levels of management, from a manager owner, a sales that's a broker and an administrative staff, and they need to meet on a regular basis. I say get your calendar out and schedule the meetings for the whole year all at once, if not monthly, maybe on a quarterly basis. That safety committee needs to be empowered to have safety content printed and shared safety articles. And again, REALTOR® Magazine is a great resource. If you go to the safety page, numerous articles, numerous resources that you can use and that you can share. So make sure that that team knows that they can bring in safety trainers, and along those lines must be subject matter experts or else agents aren't going to pay attention. So have a safety team and empower them. Lamont, for your fellow brokers who are thinking, what do I do? What's the next step? You know, I'm buying in, they convince me. What's the action step for your fellow brokers who are not currently doing anything?

LAMONT BRELAND

So, I think the first thing you have to do is just to model it. You know, as a broker it's easy to talk the talk, but if you don't walk the walk, that's a different story. But what does that look like? I think one is, like you say, just to do something, just to say, you know what? The Thursday after next, we're gonna have a safety meeting. Who out there has an interest in safety? Someone may say, Hey, my wife's a police officer. You never know. I'm sure within your office you've got a lot of resources that you don't even know about. Get together and just talk about it. Just say we're gonna have a fact finding meeting and they'll, and there'll be food, you know, <laugh>. So you try to get them there. I think brokers will be surprised at how much input they get and a little bit of therapy from agents probably that say, I'm so glad you did this. Safety is something you want to be proactive about, because if one of your agents is victimized, that's gonna change the whole culture of your company and the liability as a broker. If you've done nothing,

TRACEY HAWKINS

Both of you said it and it couldn't be more clear. That prioritizing safety is a good business decision. It's good for your liability, your bottom line, and it shows your agents that you truly care about them. You care that they're okay, not just what they can produce. Christian, what is your next step? Here's an action step that your fellow brokers need to follow to today.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

I would say first and foremost, check your policies and procedures. Make sure that you have a written policy and procedure about safety and some guidelines and best practices. We call them in our policy and procedures, expectations. And an expectation in our culture is that our agents are being safe. And to do that, we've gotta have a written safety section that policies and procedures manual. If you don't have one, there are a lot of resources out there. Tracy, you mentioned at NAR Realtor/safety, there's some resources there. Just Google safety policies and procedures for real estate safety. You'll probably find a host of examples, Tracey, I know they can reach out to you and, and you can provide those. But I would start there. But also look at, you've gotta remember that safety is not a one and done. It is not a, oh yeah, I offered that a couple years ago, check the box, we're moving on. It's not a, let's talk about it once a year in September during REALTOR® safety month. It is something that you need to weave into all that you're doing. So as much time as you're focusing on lead generation and business building activities, think about how you can sprinkle in those safety tips and those safety procedures into all of those, all of the different training that you're doing and all of the different aspects that you're trying to help somebody grow, not just their business, but also grow professionally and personally.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Can you talk about prioritizing safety and why it is good for your business? How has it actually helped your company's performance? Let's start with you, Christian.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

As we're trying to teach our agents the foundation of building a business and providing more and more value to their clients, consumers, members of the public. I think if they're trained on safety, then when they're out belly to belly, meeting with sellers and, and talking about competing to get a listing, and they're talking about the safety procedures that they've been taught by their company, that have been ingrained within them to help keep the seller safe, to help keep their house safe, to help keep the people that come into their house safe. It provides just another layer of value that I think can separate your company from others.

TRACEY HAWKINS

That is truly leading with safety. And I have to imagine that it will help the consumer, the client, see that you truly care about them. Lamont, can you answer the same question and also talk a little bit about if your agents see the value and how that helps your business.

LAMONT BRELAND

We always hear about culture. Culture, which is great, but you know, a healthy culture and a safety culture builds a safe company and a healthy company. I think agents go with a broker or a brokerage company because they trust you as a leader. They want you to guide them. And like most of us, we don't know what we don't know. We don't think about those things until someone we respect and trust. Hopefully the broker brings that to the forefront and brings that to their level of awareness that where they see the importance of it. Christian, you've probably been there, you prepare for a training, you're already, you're fired up and half the people you thought would show up would show up <laugh>, you're like, Ugh. I always say, you know what? I've never missed a meeting. If it's important enough for me to prepare for it, they know that the only reason I'm doing it is, is because it's important and you can have fun with it, too.

LAMONT BRELAND

Safety doesn't have to be just about bad things happening to good people. And I'll say safety from the NAR perspective. It's not just the agent that gets mugged, it's also the client sometimes, you know. So if a, if a client knows that you're an agent that is trained or has some type of certification or has gone through safety training, I think that's gonna give them a level of comfort as well. It's also about mental wellness. That's something that n a r is taking on in a big way in our safety community. We've got our new mental wellness toolkit that we're putting together because this is a tough business <laugh>, even when it's good, I mean, the better it is, it gets harder in a different way.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Excellent examples of how your prioritization of safety shows that your agents, that it's important to you and obviously it impacts your, your bottom line. It makes your company a more valuable company for agents to want to work for. Now, most companies in the industry now, or remote, I don't know if a lot of agents even go into the office anymore, and I know both of your companies have remote workers. Are there certain challenges that you face keeping safety top of mind even when everyone's not in the office, when your agents don't have to show up on a regular basis? Christian,

CHRISTIAN BARNES

We're pretty traditional and we still have office space for everybody. Although the one thing about the pandemic and Covid is it taught agents that we're used to coming into the office that they don't necessarily have to come in. And I think a lot of our safety procedures were based upon a climate where people were coming into the office, where our admins that were sit, you know, the people sitting at the front desk, were used to seeing people on a daily basis as they're walking out the door, they can tell Billy at the front desk that, Hey, I'm, this is where I'm going. Check on me if I'm not back. Now they're not doing that because they're not in the office. And that's where it becomes even more important to, I've said it again and again. Look at those policies and procedures and if they were written before 2020, you need to revise them and think about how you keep the people that you're not seeing on a daily basis safe.

CHRISTIAN BARNES

Something horrible could happen. And as a brokerage, we don't even know about it for several days because they're not coming into the office because we're not, you know, they're working remotely, we're not used to seeing them. So have some type of a system where, you know, you're checking on people that you know, for instance, live alone or you know that their spouse works out of town during the week and they're home alone during, during the week. And maybe you haven't heard from them in a day or so. But I think it's even more important now where people are working remote and all over the place and there's not that consistent eyeball to eyeball between broker and agent.

TRACEY HAWKINS

Systems and practices. So important. And you mentioned the policy and procedure, and that's a passion project of mine that I'm working on updating, especially after the pandemic, everything changed. I want to thank you both so much for the time that you spent sharing what you're doing to keep your agents safe and to keep the whole industry safe. And I want to remind people, like Christian said, September is REALTOR® Safety Month, but it should be year round. There's no reason why you can't use the resources at NAR.Realtor/Safety to keep safety top of mind for all of your agents and for the brokers, managers and owners listening, you have your marching orders, you have your examples, there's no excuse, everybody, stay safe. Thank you for joining us on Drive Within NAR, The Safety Series. New episodes of the Drive within NAR podcast drop twice a month at magazine.realtor/drive, or wherever you get your podcast. NAR does not endorse any product mention in this episode and does not take a stance on any specific safety tool. Members are encouraged to use only those safety tools in which they're properly trained. Find more safety resources at nar.realtor/safety.