Best Practices for the Use of Social Media in Public Safety Communications

APCO ANS 1.112.2-2020
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FOREWORD

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are an estimated 2.65 billion social media users globally as of 2019. This number provides a glimpse of the volume and layers of communication occurring in our communities, organizations and Emergency Communications Centers (ECCs). Both opportunity and responsibility exists for decision makers and leaders exploring how to manage social media in the ECC.

Recent disasters highlight the public’s use of social media when the 9-1-1 system was overwhelmed. Following Hurricane Harvey in 2017, Vice Admiral Sandra Stosz of the United States Coast Guard stated, “That’s how we rescued the 11,000 people, leaning in on how the public was self-selecting to use social media, because they couldn’t get through on 9-1-1 calls.” This demonstrates that the public will seek out alternative communication channels to contact emergency services, even if it is not an official public safety-sanctioned platform. Even if the ECC is not prepared.

A survey by the American Red Cross found one in five respondents would attempt to notify emergency responders through email, websites or social media if they were unable to reach 9-1-1. Further, if citizens knew of someone else seeking help, 44% would post a request on their social network for someone else to contact authorities on a friend’s behalf; 35% would ask for help directly on an agency’s Facebook page; 28% would send a direct Twitter message to emergency responders. Of these same respondents, 74% stated they expected an emergency response in less than an hour following their tweet or Facebook post.

This study introduces a difficult, even unknown, public expectation of public safety agencies and ECCs. It also serves as a warning that ECCs must prepare for these possibilities prior to a disaster and/or consider incorporating social media as an operational tool in their daily workflow prior to a disaster.

This standard was revised to address the evolution and contemporary issues of social media impacting ECCs. Next generation 9-1-1, emerging technologies and the ubiquitous use of social media require standards for the use and management of social media in the ECC. Agency operational policies and procedures can then be created based on the individual needs of each public safety agency.

This working group of emergency communications professionals from various agency sizes and communications disciplines from across the nation came together to address this need. The following standard covers social media usage such as:

- Agency site management – the social media capabilities of a public safety agency
- Personnel usage – both on and off duty while employed with a public safety agency
- Community engagement – as an educational and informational tool
- Operations – as an emergency and non-emergency reporting tool
- Interoperability – interfacing with other agencies

The following foundational policies and procedures are based on what is known today and strived to account for the fast pace evolution of technology. It cannot anticipate all future technology advancements or cultural nuances in the use of the technology and its impact on the ECC. Leaders are encouraged to remain contemporary, aware and flexible with technology changes, and be mindful of the liability associated with the associated potential changes.
Related, but not included in this standard, are auxiliary standards such as:

- Cybersecurity Standard
- Cybersecurity Training Standard
- Public Safety Communications Center Key Performance Indicator Standard
- Next Generation Standard
Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

SCOPE
Social media can be an effective communication tool for agencies. The purpose of this standard is to provide a consistent foundation for agencies to develop policies and procedures. This standard recognizes the need for each agency to customize specific policies and procedures to their environment to meet their agency’s needs and to protect themselves from liability. Regardless if an agency elects not to use social media in the operational response, proper operational procedures should be developed and appropriately communicated for both official and personal use of social media.

Guidelines for agency employees should be provided in order to warn employees of the potential impact their personal accounts may have on their agency, public trust, or credibility.

Social media also has the potential to be a significant risk to effective communications and data privacy. This standard is intended to minimize some of those potential risks.
Chapter Two

Administration

SCOPE
Social media can be an effective tool for reaching out to a broad audience. Agencies should create policies addressing the administrative functions such as site management, records retention, information release authority, and the use of social media for recruitment and hiring.

2.1 Site Management

2.1.1 Agencies should prominently display their capabilities of social media monitoring for citizens reporting emergencies or non-emergencies.

2.1.2 Agencies should provide alternatives for reporting both emergencies and non-emergencies.

2.1.2.1 Example: “This site/page is monitored 24/7/365 by [agency name] for the reporting of non-emergencies only. If you would like to report a non-emergency by phone, dial [agency non-emergency phone number]. Dial 9-1-1 to report emergencies.”

2.1.3 Any official agency-sponsored social media site or page should be clearly identified with the following phrase: “Official social media site of ‘agency name.’”

2.1.4 Agencies should place a disclaimer on the site indicating that information included in posts and originating device identification information are subject to public record and shall be recorded and archived.

2.2 Records Retention

2.2.1 Agencies should record and archive for historical and legal purposes any information posted and received through social media sites.

2.2.2 As with 9-1-1 calls, agencies should determine what and how to record and archive information received through social media. All management of received information shall comply with local, state, and federal laws, while maintaining an orderly and efficient flow of data.

2.2.2.1 Commercial social media tools are available for recording information from social sites (Ex: Buffer, Sprinklr, GovQA, etc.).

2.2.3 Consideration by the agency should be taken regarding the creation and control of digital images taken by agency personnel to protect the privacy rights of personnel, patients, and the public.
2.2.3.1 Agencies should define appropriate types of images taken to include: photographs, video recordings, or electronic files containing graphic images.

2.2.3.2 Agencies should develop policies that address approved devices to capture images during an incident to include helmet cams, dash cams, and drone footage.

2.3 Decision-Making Authority

2.3.1 Agencies should have protocols identifying when social media will be used to communicate with the public.

2.3.2 Agencies should designate a minimum of two people who are responsible for updating, reviewing, and determining what information is posted on the site. The agency should also identify backup personnel for times the designated personnel are not available.

2.3.3 Agencies shall designate who is responsible for social media communications, and an approval chain of command for any external messages.

2.4 Recruitment and Hiring

2.4.1 Agencies should consider using social media as a tool for recruitment and hiring.
Chapter Three

Personnel

SCOPE
Social media is used worldwide. Sharing information, observations, and perspective is a social norm through online platforms while on duty and off duty. Public safety employees’ personal and professional social media actions shall be in accordance with their agency’s mission statement, vision statement and/or code of ethics.

3.1 On-Duty Usage

3.1.1 Agencies shall prohibit on-duty use from interfering or distracting from job performance and requirements.

3.1.2 Agencies shall develop policies addressing the release of information.

3.1.3 Agencies should have policy and/or procedures for training the employees in the proper use of social media to adhere to the agency’s mission statement, vision statement, and/or code of ethics.

3.1.3.1 Agencies should have training materials and testing methodology in order to demonstrate proficiency on the agency’s established social media protocols.

3.1.3.2 Employee training should include a review of the agency’s standards of conduct pertaining to social media.

3.1.4 Agencies should work with their Human Resources and/or hiring departments to develop a policy on using social media for investigative purposes during pre-hire background checks.

3.2 Off-Duty Usage

3.2.1 Agencies should have policies addressing employee employment identification on personal social media.

3.2.2 Agencies should develop protocols for employees addressing what information is permissible to share on employees’ personal page, agency page, and other online platforms.

3.2.3 Employees should not release any media such as pictures, video, and audio recordings, obtained during the performance of an employee’s duties, agency-related activities, and any agency responder activities unless prior approval is obtained within the agency’s policies.
3.2.4 Agencies shall have a policy regarding the posting of photographs and/or videos of employees and/or coworkers in uniform without the coworker and/or employer’s permission.

3.2.5 The employee shall not violate agency or Human Resource policies such as harassment, bullying or retaliatory statements using online platforms, photographs, and/or videos.

3.2.6 Policies addressing the violation of established protocols should be addressed by agencies.

3.2.7 Employees shall not create duplicate or unauthorized agency pages or accounts.

3.2.8 Agency policies should address sharing or commenting on controversial information involving the agency or agency partners.
Chapter Four

Operations

SCOPE
Agencies using social media for citizens to request emergency or non-emergency calls for service should create policy and/or procedure(s). This chapter provides guidance in creating policies related to operational reporting to public safety. Agencies should clearly communicate the operational reporting abilities offered to their communities.

4.1 General Considerations

4.1.1 Agencies shall promote the use of dialing 9-1-1 as the primary means for the reporting of emergencies.

4.1.1.1 Agencies should define and provide examples of what constitutes an emergency or non-emergency within their local jurisdiction.

4.1.2 Agencies should define rules about what pictures and/or video are appropriate to send through social media reporting from the public.

4.1.3 Agencies should develop policies covering the use of any abbreviations, jargon, slang, local references and colloquialisms.

4.1.4 Agencies should develop policies that address social media access and usage by the agency’s ECC employees during an incident for research and investigation.

4.1.4.1 Agencies should incorporate a policy for a quality assurance process to review employees’ social media work performance.

4.1.4.2 Agencies should address how to validate sources of information before acting on it.

4.1.5 Agencies using social media as an operational reporting tool should include social media in their Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP).

4.1.6 In order to ensure the ECC is able to maintain life safety operations efficiently, agencies should develop a policy regarding the use of social media and posting public information after an incident has been completed or for ongoing investigations to include:

4.1.6.1 The resolution of the incident and key contacts for additional information or questions.

4.1.6.2 Updates and direction on who to contact after the incident for additional information, or to provide information for ongoing investigations.

4.2 Bi-Directional Community Engagement
4.2.1 Information shared with the community should not compromise public safety, officer safety, or potential investigations.

4.2.2 Agencies should consider when to use social media for community notifications regarding in-progress incidents.

4.2.3 Social media should be considered for public education.

4.2.3.1 Examples: When to change smoke detector batteries, when to call 9-1-1, AMBER Alerts, community safety events and other public events.

4.2.4 Agencies should encourage the public to sign up to receive notifications, when available.

4.2.5 Agencies should develop policies for monitoring and responding to social media posts from citizens during an emergency. Agencies must recognize citizens expect immediate information. If agencies do not provide the needed information, the public will seek it from other sources.

4.3 Interoperability

4.3.1 Any content or communications regarding in-progress incidents and/or open and active investigations should be done by the agency-designated decision maker.

4.3.2 Agencies should develop procedures for interfacing with fusion centers or other entities to eliminate overlap in responsibilities or public communication.

4.3.3 Consolidated 9-1-1 ECCs shall work with the agencies for which they dispatch to ensure that a consistent message is relayed to citizens to ensure an understanding of where and how to request assistance from their agency.

4.3.4 Agencies shall have social media site procedures for handling emergencies and non-emergencies reported by non-English or other customers that need additional translation services.

4.3.5 Agencies should consider preplanning with their surrounding agencies regarding social media policy, practices, and any impact on operational response during a major event.

4.4 Non-Emergency Incidents

4.4.1 Agencies should establish policies around the use of research and investigation information obtained during an incident.

4.4.1.1 Examples: Locating next of kin, witnesses to a crime, additional details about an incident or suspect.
4.4.2 Agencies should consider having policy and/or procedures addressing additional non-emergency social media usage, such as real-time community notifications (i.e. road closures, water main breaks), and for situational awareness (i.e. school threat notifications).

4.5 Emergency Incidents

4.5.1 Social media can be a tool to provide information to the public and to receive information from the public during and following emergency incidents, to include large scale, multi-jurisdictional, and multi-day events. If an agency is going to take advantage of this tool, policies and/or procedures shall be in place to identify how that will occur.

4.5.2 Agencies shall promote the use of dialing 9-1-1 as the primary means for the reporting of emergencies.

4.5.3 Agencies shall consider and promote messaging when they are unable to monitor social media due to a significant increase in call volume.

4.5.4 Agencies should consider pre-planning with their surrounding agencies regarding social media policy, practices, and any impact on the operational response during an emergency incident.

4.5.5 Agencies should develop policies for monitoring and responding to social media posts from citizens during an emergency. Agencies must recognize citizens expect immediate information. If agencies do not provide the needed information, the public will seek it from other sources.

4.5.6 Any release of information or public communications regarding the incident should follow the agency’s designated decision making policies.

4.6 Catastrophic Incidents

4.6.1 Social media can be a tool to provide information to the public and to receive information from the public during and following catastrophic incidents, to include large scale, multi-jurisdictional, and events with an extended duration. If an agency is going to take advantage of this tool, policies and/or procedures shall be in place to identify how that will occur.

4.6.2 Agencies shall promote the use of dialing 9-1-1 as the primary means for the reporting of emergencies.

4.6.3 Agencies shall consider and promote messaging when they are unable to monitor social media due to a significant increase in call volume.
4.6.4 Agencies should consider pre-planning with their surrounding agencies regarding social media policy, practices, and any impact on the operational response during an emergency incident.

4.6.5 Agencies should develop policies for monitoring and responding to social media posts from citizens during an emergency. Agencies must recognize citizens expect immediate information. If agencies do not provide the needed information, the public will seek it from other sources.

4.6.6 Any release of information or public communications regarding the incident should follow the agency’s designated decision making policies.

4.6.7 Agencies should consider back-up plans to incorporate aid within their COOP plan to manage social media reporting.
# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANS</td>
<td>American National Standards</td>
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<td>ANSI</td>
<td>American National Standards Institute</td>
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<td>APCO</td>
<td>Association of Public Safety Communications Officials</td>
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<td>CAD</td>
<td>Computer Aided Dispatch</td>
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<td>COOP</td>
<td>Continuity of Operations Plan</td>
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<td>ECC</td>
<td>Emergency Communications Center</td>
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<td>NG911</td>
<td>Next Generation 9-1-1</td>
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<td>SDC</td>
<td>Standards Development Committee</td>
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GLOSSARY

AGENCY: The hiring authority that defines the roles, responsibilities, policies and procedures, and performance standards that direct the activity of the Public Safety Telecommunicator. In multi-discipline centers, the agency governs the operation providing call taking/dispatch and related services to customer agencies. In single discipline centers, a single agency may direct these services for one or more departments within a service area.

CALLS FOR SERVICE: A call that results in the provision of a public safety service or response.

CALLTAKER: A Telecommunicator who processes incoming calls for service through the analyzing, prioritizing, and disseminating of information to aid in the safety of the public and responders.

SHALL: Within the context of this standard, “shall” indicates a mandatory requirement.

SHOULD: Within the context of this standard, “should” indicates a recommendation.

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES (SOP): A written directive that provides a guideline for carrying out an activity. The guideline may be made mandatory by including terms such as “shall” rather than “should” or “must” rather than “may”.

SOCIAL MEDIA: Any of a number of integrated web-based technology tools that allow users to create content and share that content through various connections.

TELECOMMUNICATOR: The individual employed by a public safety agency as the first of the first responders whose primary responsibility is to receive, process, transmit, and/or dispatch emergency and non-emergency calls for service for law enforcement, fire, emergency medical, and other public safety services via telephone, radio, and other communication devices.

QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS: A formal assessment process by which actual performance, behavior, and outcomes are compared against established standards to ensure compliance, consistency, and accuracy in the delivery of quality service.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special recognition goes to the committee members that provided their expertise in updating this document to successfully create this candidate standard.

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