



**San Diego County Sheriff
Training Bulletin
William D. Gore, Sheriff
July 2019**



Social Media and Law Enforcement

This bulletin was created as a reminder for members of the San Diego Sheriff's Department to exercise good judgment in their use of social media. Please spend a few minutes of your time reading the following bulletin and Policy and Procedure section.

On June 1, 2019, BuzzFeed News posted a story titled "Cops Across the US Have Been Exposed Posting Racist and Violent Things on Facebook". The article highlighted the work of The Plain View Project, a research project aimed at identifying Facebook posts and commentary by current and former law enforcement officers endorsing violence, racism or bigotry.

The research project began with the selection of eight jurisdictions in the United States to serve as their base for the study. The group utilized publicly published rosters from those law enforcement jurisdictions to identify officers and subsequently identify social media accounts associated to the officers. The research group identified 3,500 Facebook pages belonging to law enforcement members within the designated jurisdictions and reviewed every post and public comment to determine if any undermined the public's trust and confidence in law enforcement. After reviewing these accounts, the research group amassed a collection of more than 5,000 posts and comments that met their criteria of violence and racism and then published them.

The research project was able to confirm a person's law enforcement employment via their social media accounts. Sites such as Facebook encourage users to list their employment to identify fellow coworkers online and build their network. Some LE members have posted photos of themselves in uniform or at work. Additionally, while some officers have chosen to remain private and not share their LE status with an online community, others have identified them by posting and tagging a photo of them in uniform or at work.

While the San Diego region was not a part of the selection made by the research group, it is feasible this study could be replicated to focus on local law enforcement agencies and may result in the publishing of a similar article. It is important to remember the personal risks associated to law enforcement while on social media. Anything posted to social media is permanent and can have a lasting effect on their personal and professional lives.

All employees need to remain cognizant of social media activity on and off duty. This is pursuant to the Sheriff's Department's Policy and Procedure Section, 7.14.

The information in this Training Bulletin was edited for distribution by the In-Service Training Unit. If you have any information or expertise in a specific area and would like to write a training bulletin, please contact Corporal Brent Longfellow at the In-Service Training Unit via e-mail at [REDACTED]



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7.14 SOCIAL MEDIA DEFINITIONS

Social Media includes, but is not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Nixle, Wikipedia, blogs, etc.

I. OFFICIAL DEPARTMENT PRESENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A. Potential uses include, but are not limited to:

1. Public notification of missing persons
2. Public notification of wanted persons
3. Advertise community programs and events
4. Distribute crime prevention information
5. Announce notable accomplishments of staff
6. Solicit identification of suspects from photos
7. Distribute time-sensitive updates in emergency conditions
8. Conduct personnel recruitments
9. Public safety announcements

B. Department-Sanctioned Social Media Use

1. Social media accounts and pages purporting to be from the San Diego County Sheriff's Department or any of its component workplaces may only be established upon approval of the affected Commander via Chain of Command and the Public Affairs Director or his/her designee.
2. The affected Station Commander and the Public Affairs Director, or his/her designee, shall respectively establish the person or people responsible for maintaining and moderating the specific social media pages.
3. Where possible, the social media pages shall clearly indicate they are maintained by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department and have contact information prominently displayed.

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4. Where possible, social media pages should state that the opinions expressed by visitors do not reflect the opinions of the department and are subject to public disclosure.
5. Where possible, social media pages shall indicate that posted comments will be monitored and the department reserves the right to remove comments that are off-topic.
6. Social media content shall adhere to applicable laws, regulations and policies, including policies relating to dissemination of information.
7. Social media content is subject to public records laws. Social media content that is authored by Department personnel for official or investigative purposes is subject to public record laws. Posted comments from outside sources that are connected to a Department approved social media site are the sole property of the Internet Service Provider (ISP). Records retention schedules apply only to material authored by Department personnel.
8. Social media content development, posting, maintenance, and use on station maintained pages shall adhere to the guidelines as set forth in social media sites guidance manual.
9. Department personnel representing the department on social media shall:
 - i. Conduct themselves at all times as representatives of the department and adhere to all department policies and conventionally accepted standards of decorum.
 - ii. Communicate in a business-like manner, avoiding abbreviations and slang terms often used in social media settings.
 - iii. Not conduct political activities or personal business.
 - iv. Not make statements about the guilt or innocence of any suspect or arrestee or comment on pending prosecutions.

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v. Not distribute information or videos relating to department training or work-related assignments without the expressed permission of a supervisor from the affected unit.

vi. Observe and abide by all copyright, trademark or service mark restrictions when posting materials to social media.

II. USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR RESEARCH OR INVESTIGATIVE PURPOSES

A. Potential uses include, but are not limited to:

1. Identification of criminal suspects and their associates
2. Locating missing persons or runaway juveniles
3. Background investigations of prospective employees

B. Investigative Use of Social Media

1. The Department has an obligation to include internet-based content when conducting background investigations of job candidates.
2. Vetting techniques shall be applied uniformly to all candidates
3. Reasonable efforts must be made to validate internet-based information considered during the hiring process.

III. PERSONAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Employees are reminded that comments, photos and other postings to social media reflecting their nexus to the department may have the effect of diminishing the public's trust and confidence in the department. Accordingly, such postings may violate the Sheriff's Rules of Conduct.

Employee's personal use of social media should not be attributable to the County or the Sheriff's Department or to the employee's job function with the department. Employees shall conduct their social media use in such a manner that a reasonable reader would not think that the employee is speaking for or on behalf of the County or Department unless having been designated as such.

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Personal use of social media must be in conformance with all laws, relevant department policies including those relating to harassment, discriminatory conduct and dissemination of information.

A. On duty personal use

1. Employees are generally prohibited from engaging in social media use while on duty, except as may be required in the performance of duty.

2. An exception to this general prohibition is during emergency conditions when social media may be a source of timely public safety information or provide an alternative source of communication when telephones are inoperable.

IV. QUESTIONS

Social media is a rapidly-evolving technology and there will likely be issues that arise that are not addressed in this policy. If you are uncertain about the application of this policy or if questions arise about the appropriate use of social media, you should seek guidance before posting to social media, since most information cannot be recalled. The Public Affairs Director has been designated as the contact person for purposes of answering questions relating to this policy. (Reviewed 12-8-16)