North Kingstown Fire Department

Standard Operating Guidelines		2000 Series
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I. PURPOSE

To provide guidance to North Kingstown Fire Department (Department) personnel to clarify the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate use of social media [including both official departmental and personal social media accounts] and to provide guidelines on its management, administration, and oversight.

I. BACKGROUND

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media outlets and systems are available and used by many people, including Department personnel, and the Department itself. Social media provides a valuable means of assisting the Department in meeting community education, community information, and other related organizational and community objectives. This policy identifies possible uses of social media that may be evaluated and used by the Department as deemed necessary by the Fire Chief.

The Department recognizes the role that social media tools may play in the personal lives of Department personnel. The personal use of social media can also impact departmental personnel in their official capacity as public safety professionals. This policy provides guidance of a precautionary nature as well as restrictions and prohibitions on the use of social media by Department personnel. The Department endorses the secure use of social media to enhance communication and information exchange, streamline processes, and foster productivity among its employees.

II. SCOPE

A. Official Department Sanctioned/Operated Social Media Accounts
B. Personal Social Media Accounts

III. DEFINITION(S)

Blog - A self-published diary or commentary on a particular topic that may allow visitors to post responses, reactions, or comments.
Harassment - Systematic and/or continued unwelcome actions of one party or group intended to demean, threaten, intimidate, or alarm anther party or group.
Hate Speech - Speech that attacks a person or group on the basis of attributes including race, ethnic origin, national origin, skin color, gender (including status as pregnant or nursing), religion, disability, age, or sexual orientation or identity, indicating a level of intolerance or hostility that is incompatible with a commitment to serve all members of the community. Included is speech that threatens violence or harm directed toward any person or group; or threatens to or encourages others to withhold public safety services from any person or group.

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Post - Content shared by an individual on a social media site or the act of publishing content on a site.
Profile - Information that a user provides about himself or herself on a social networking site.
Social Media - A category of Internet-based resources that enable the user to generate content and encourage other user participation. This includes, but is not limited to, social networking sites and pages which constitute those sites: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Wikipedia, blogs, and other sites. (There are thousands of these types of sites and this is only a short list.) Social Media includes:

(a) "Department Social Media", which is Social Media managed by Department personnel to support the execution of departmental operations and other official purposes; and

(b) "Personal Social Media", which is Social Media managed by individual employees for non-departmental purposes.

Social Networks - Platforms where users can create profiles, share information, and socialize with others using a range of technologies.
Speech - Expression or communication of thoughts or opinions in spoken words, in writing, by expressive conduct, symbolism, photographs, videotape, or related forms of communication.
Spokesperson for the Department - An employee/member who makes a statement: on behalf of the Department; in his/her capacity as an employee or member of the Department; or in such a way that it may reasonably be attributed to the Department as opposed to making the statement as a private citizen.

IV. POLICY

This policy addresses social media in general terms. Technology will outpace our ability to discover emerging technology and create policies governing its use. The inappropriate use of social media may lead to actual harm and disruption to the Department. This harm and disruption may be but is not limited to the public's perception of whether the organization and its employees are willing to render services to them in a time of need.

Engaging in social media and social networking activities is a form of speech. Nothing in these rules is intended to unlawfully restrict a member's right to discuss as a private citizen, matters of public concern, or engage in protected concerted activity with fellow employees. However, members have an affirmative obligation to avoid acting as, or being perceived as a spokesperson for the North Kingstown Fire Department.

A. Official Public Safety Communications Department Sanctioned/Operated Social Media Account(s) Requirements

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1. Each social media page shall include an introductory statement that clearly specifies the purpose and scope of the Department's presence on the specific social media platform.
2. Social media page(s) shall link to or reference the Department's official town website.
3. Social media page(s) shall be designed for the target audience(s) such as the community, civic leadership, employees, or potential recruits.
4. All Department social media sites or pages shall be approved by the Fire Chief and shall be administered by the Fire Chief and/or authorized designee(s).
5. Social media pages shall clearly indicate they are maintained by the Department and shall have the Department logo and contact information prominently displayed.
6. Social media content shall adhere to applicable laws, regulations, and policies, including all information technology and records management policies of the Town of North Kingstown.
7. Social media content is subject to open records laws.
8. Relevant records retention schedules apply to social media content.
9. Content must be managed, stored, and retrieved to comply with open records laws.
10. Social media pages should state that the opinions expressed by visitors to the page(s) do not reflect the opinions of the Department.
11. Social media pages shall clearly indicate that posted comments will be monitored and the Department reserves the right to remove obscenities, off-topic comments, and personal attacks.
12. Social media pages shall clearly indicate that any content posted or submitted for posting is subject to public disclosure.

B. Official Public Safety Communications Department Social Media Procedure

The following rules apply to Department personnel acting as a spokesperson for the Department via official social media outlets:

1. The use of Department computers by Department personnel to access social media without express authorization is prohibited.
2. Personnel shall conduct themselves at all times as representatives of the Department and shall adhere to all departmental standards of conduct and observe conventionally accepted protocols and proper decorum.
3. Personnel shall identify themselves as a member of the Department.

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4. Personnel shall not post, transmit, or otherwise disseminate confidential information, including photographs or videos, related to Department training, responses, activities, or work-related assignments without permission of the Fire Chief.
5. Personnel shall not conduct political activities or private business on the Departmental social media.
6. Personnel shall not use personally owned devices to manage the Department's social media activities or in the course of performing official duties.
7. Personnel shall observe and abide by all copyright, trademark, and service mark restrictions in posting materials to electronic media.

C. Official Public Safety Communications Department Social Media Usage

Social media is a valuable tool when providing information about:

1. Road closures
2. Special events
3. Weather emergencies
4. Updates on Department programs and activities
5. Major ongoing events in the jurisdiction that affects the entire community
6. Employment Opportunities

D. Personal Social Media Account(s)

Department personnel shall adhere to the following when using social media.

1. Department personnel are free to express themselves as private citizens on social media sites to the degree that their speech does not impair or impede the performance of their duties, impair discipline and harmony among coworkers, or negatively affect the public perception of the Department. ***No member, while speaking as a private citizen on a matter of public concern, shall in any way indicate that the speech is made on behalf of the Department, or speak in such a way as to cause actual harm or disruption to the mission and functions of the Department.***
2. Members may speak on a matter of public concern as a spokesperson for the department only with express permission from the Fire Chief or his/her designee.
3. Department personnel are cautioned that speech made in the course of their official capacity, that has a connection to the employee's professional duties and responsibilities may not be protected under the First Amendment. This applies to both "on duty" and "off-duty" speech.
4. Speech that violates this policy may serve as the basis for discipline if that speech is deemed detrimental to the honor or reputation of the Department.

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5. Department personnel shall assume that their speech and related activity on social media sites will reflect upon their position within the Department.
6. Department personnel shall not post, transmit, or otherwise disseminate any information to which they have access as a result of their employment without written permission from the Fire Chief or his/her designee.
7. Department personnel shall use good judgment, moral conduct, and adhere to the professional standards and code of conduct of the Department if they elect to do the following on personal social media pages or outlets:
    i. Identify themselves as a member of the Department and/or display Department logos, uniforms, or similar identifying items on personal web pages.
    ii. Post personal photographs or provide similar means of personal recognition that may cause them to be identified as a member of the Department.
    iii. Personnel who elect to identify themselves as a member of the Department shall post a disclaimer that they do not represent the Department in any official capacity and that their comments should in no way be interpreted to represent the position of the Department.
        a. Disclaimers alone may not shield members from potential discipline for the violation of this policy.
8. Adherence to the Department's code of conduct is required in the personal use of social media.
    i. When engaging in social media or social networking activities, all personnel will maintain a level of professionalism in both on-duty and off-duty conduct that is consistent with the honorable mission of our Department.
    ii. Members shall not engage in speech that is false, deceptive, libelous, slanderous, misleading, obscene, sexually explicit, expresses bias against any race, any religion, or any protected class of individuals, or causes harm to others, including speech that constitutes hate speech, or harassment.
    iii. Members shall not discuss protected or confidential matters of the Department, including:
        a. matters that are under investigation
        b. patient and employee information protected by HIPAA or medical confidentiality laws, or
        c. personnel matters that are protected from disclosure by law.
9. The use of Department computers by Department personnel to access social media is prohibited without the express authorization of the Fire Chief.
10. Department personnel shall not divulge information gained by reason of their position or authority; make any statements, speeches, appearances, and endorsements; or publish materials that could reasonably be considered to represent the views or positions of the Department without express written authorization from the Fire Chief.

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11. Department personnel should be aware that they may be subject to civil litigation for publishing or posting false information that harms the reputation of another person, group, or organization. Such activity is otherwise known as defamation which includes:
    i. Publishing or posting private facts and personal information about someone without their permission that has not been revealed previously to the public, is not of legitimate public concern, the disclosure of which would be offensive to a reasonable person;
    ii. Using someone else's name, likeness, or other personal attributes without that person's permission for an exploitative purpose; or
    iii. Publishing the creative work of another, trademarks, or certain confidential business information without the express permission of the owner of that information.
12. Department personnel shall be mindful that privacy settings and social media sites are constantly changing and shall never assume that personal information posted on such sites is protected.
13. Department personnel shall expect that any information created, transmitted, downloaded, exchanged, or discussed in a public online forum may be accessed by the Department at any time without prior notice.
14. Department personnel shall be mindful that anything written or posted on social media websites becomes a permanent part of the World Wide Web.
15. On-duty members who discuss incident and/or work-related matters on social media should be aware that such disclosure may inadvertently trigger public records requirements under the Rhode Island Access to Public Records Law [RIGL §38-2-1-15].

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