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Law Enforcement Social Media Policies
Recommendations to Support Community Engagement

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Many law enforcement agencies across the country use social media to disseminate information and engage the communities they serve. These agencies navigate the changes and developments in social media technology while balancing agency policies and needs. To ensure that a department has a clear vision for its social media use and most effectively pursues that vision in practice, it is important to develop and regularly update social media policy and guidelines.

Because social media is a relatively new technology with the ability to reach a vast number of people instantly, many agencies have formal policies in place and dedicated staff for managing social media accounts. These policies often cover allowable content, personnel responsible for social media, and restrictions on professional or personal use. However, few policies explain how social media can be used to support community engagement. Community engagement on social media can include a variety of activities ranging from sharing content that community members are likely to view, like, or share, to soliciting tips or feedback from community members through social media posts. Law enforcement agencies' use of social media has been associated with benefits such as building trust with and increasing satisfaction among community members (IACP 2014).

For law enforcement, a social media presence usually entails having official agency accounts on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram. Some agencies have multiple accounts within a platform. For example, on Twitter an agency might have an overall account, specific precinct or district accounts, division accounts, and an account for the Chief of Police. Individual officers may also have personal accounts that mention their law enforcement duties. Because social media is a flexible tool, it is important to develop a policy that identifies how it should be used.

As part of a larger project focusing on how social media can be a tool to support community policing, this brief explains how an agency's social media policy and guidelines can be adapted to promote community engagement. We define a social media policy as a formal document, often publicly available, that outlines the agency's philosophy or approach to social media. We consider social media guidelines the procedures or strategies used to implement that policy, similar to what would be included in a procedure manual. As part of a survey of law enforcement use of social media, we collected social media policies from responding agencies. This brief reviews common themes in that sample of social media policies collected from 70 law enforcement agencies, describes important considerations for social media policies and guidelines, and provides strategies to develop or adapt policies and guidelines to support community engagement.

Develop a Robust Social Media Policy

It is critical for agencies to develop and implement a foundational social media policy in order to most effectively reap the benefits associated with social media use—like increased community trust and support—and mitigate unnecessary risks—such as a breach of confidence. Fortunately, a number of resources exist to guide agencies in the development of their policies. (All the resources included in this brief, along with summaries and links to the original sources, can be found in the appendix). The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) has published five key policy considerations that every agency should contemplate when creating a social media policy. These considerations include identifying the **scope** of the policy; outlining guidance on **official use**; outlining guidance on **personal use**; addressing relevant **legal issues**; and referencing **related policies** already in place.

Other resources also offer detailed guidelines and recommendations. For example, "Ingredients of a Solid Social Media Policy for Law Enforcement Agencies" suggests that law enforcement agency policies for social media must go beyond what a standard policy that is not specific to law enforcement includes. The report outlines seven components that all general social media policies should address as well as seven law enforcement-specific considerations, such as an emphasis on integrity. "Update on Social Media Policies for Law Enforcement" examines some additional areas for law enforcement policies that include using social media in cyber-vetting job applicants and in investigations. For law enforcement agencies looking for more structured guidance, IACP's model social media policy and Archive Social's social media policy template for law enforcement can be used as a starting point for developing a policy. Some agencies may also have access to a social media policy if they use policy development and management companies like Lexipol or the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). It is important to remember, however, that these resources are meant to be models and should be customized to address an individual agency's needs and priorities.

Declare Specific Objectives in the Policy

While the aforementioned general considerations and guidance can be helpful across the board, many agencies have specific objectives for their social media use, such as improving investigations, more

thoroughly vetting job applicants, or increasing community engagement (Kim, Oglesby-Neal, and Mohr 2017; IACP 2010). It is highly recommended that those objectives and priorities be clearly stated in the formal policy (IACP 2010; Rodgers 2016).[1] Specific guidance also exists for departments developing a social media policy for investigations (see *Developing a Policy on the Use of Social Media in Intelligence and Investigative Activities*), for vetting candidates (see *Developing a Cybervetting Strategy for Law Enforcement*), and for promoting community engagement as detailed in this brief.

Social media can be used to provide benefits such as increased positive interaction with the community, but in order to realize those benefits agencies are encouraged to include specific language in their social media policies that establishes community engagement as a priority (Rodgers 2016). For example, the Seattle Police Department's social media policy states, "The Department endorses the secure use of social media ... to enhance community engagement, information distribution, and neighborhood safety."[2]

Consider Covering a Range of Topics in the Policy

As part of the 2016 survey of law enforcement use of social media conducted in collaboration with IACP, we asked agencies to share copies of their social media policies. Eighty percent of responding agencies indicated that they already have a written social media policy (n=412), and 11 percent indicated that they were currently developing one (n=55) (Kim, Oglesby-Neal, and Mohr 2017). After following up with agencies that indicated they would be willing to share their policies, we received policies from 70 law enforcement agencies. We then analyzed them for common themes and considerations. The most common topics in these policies are listed in table 1.

In the 70 policies we examined, some topics appeared much more frequently than others. The most common topics were the type of content allowed and not allowed (93 percent), who has authority over social media engagement (84 percent), and explanations of professional and personal use of social media (83 percent). Other common subjects were definitions of social media (77 percent), the approval process for posts (69 percent), use for investigations (63 percent), and who is allowed to use social media (61 percent). Less than half of the policies covered records retention, oversight and enforcement, reporting violations of policy, recruitment, and privacy concerns. The least common topics included conducting employment background checks, providing training, and engaging with social media users.

This swath of topics demonstrates that social media is a dynamic tool with many considerations. An agency's policy may not need to cover all of these topics, but it is worth thinking through each topic and how it may apply to use of social media. Agencies focused on community engagement should specifically consider including guidance around professional use of social media, engaging with social media users, and the type of content allowed (and encouraged).

TABLE 1
Topics in Law Enforcement Social Media Policies

Topic	Percentage including
Type of content allowed and not allowed	93%
Who manages social media	84%
Professional use	83%
Personal use	83%
Definition of social media and other related terms	77%
Approval process	69%
Use for investigations	63%
Who is allowed to use social media	61%
Records retention	50%
Oversight and enforcement	47%
Obligation to report violations of policy	46%
Recruitment	43%
Privacy concerns	39%
Employment background check	23%
Training	17%
Engaging with social media users	6%

IDENTIFY A SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

Almost all the policies analyzed also identified an individual in the department who is responsible for managing the agency's social media. The vast majority of policies identified the chief of police as the authority on social media use (70 percent), but others included media affairs coordinators, community relations officers, and public safety directors. These authority figures were often referenced as those responsible for approving content, determining who is authorized to post on behalf of the department, and setting specific objectives and initiatives related to social media. It is important to note that there are different styles of communication management. While numerous agencies are centralized in that the designated individual controls or oversees social media activities pursued by individual officers, some agencies provide individual officers with much discretion regarding how to use social media professionally. In the latter situation, policies should identify at least one individual who serves as the authority on social media use. Depending on the organization and capacity of the agency, allowing a community relations officer to manage social media may help facilitate community engagement. For smaller agencies, giving this responsibility to the chief or a sworn or civilian member may be more feasible.

REVIEW RELATED POLICIES

Many of the social media policies referred to other existing agency policies on investigations, recruitment, employee speech, or other topics. When developing a social media policy (or adapting it to promote community engagement) it is important to consider whether that policy comports with related agency policies. Similarly, our analysis of law enforcement policies revealed that several agencies also follow the social media policy of the local city or county government. When considering adding community engagement language to the social media policy, an agency may need to also review existing language in the local government's social media policy.

Policy Consideration to Promote Community Engagement

Agencies should consider how community members perceive their posts when developing policies to promote community engagement. One example of a policy consideration regards sharing identifying information. Many agencies post pictures or names of people that they have arrested, even if those people have not faced trial and been convicted of a crime. Sharing pictures and names of people who have been arrested on social media may lead to negative social consequences for the identified individuals and their family and friends that may not have occurred if the information had not been made easily accessible on social media. Agencies may have informal guidelines about sharing names and pictures of people who have been arrested, but they may not be formally written in a policy. Because many policies state types of allowable and unallowable content, it may be worth outlining in the social media policy when identifying information (names, pictures, etc.) of suspected or arrested individuals can be shared on social media. Thinking through the community perception of social media posts is crucial to ensuring an agency's social media activity promotes community engagement.

Create a Social Media Guideline Document

While formal social media policies are critical for establishing a vision for departmental use of social media, internal guidelines can aid in the everyday implementation of that vision. While sometimes mentioned briefly in formal policies, topics such as the intended tone of social media posts, management of multiple platforms, training, and specific approval processes can benefit from more practical guidance. When it comes to community engagement, specific topics that law enforcement agencies should consider implementing guidelines around include the following:

- tone of social media posts
- use of humor in social media posts
- management of multiple platforms

- training frequency
- training content
- specific approval processes

A small number of agencies include these topics in their formal social media policies. For example, nearly one fifth of the policies we analyzed mentioned training but provided no guidance beyond listing what content, at a minimum, would be covered in the training. Internal guidelines offer an opportunity to expand on these topics in a way that will more directly influence practice and allow agencies to achieve their overall goals as outlined in their formal policies.

Cover Social Media Practices and Training in the Guidelines

Internal guidelines can provide helpful direction on social media practices such as the use of humor, appropriate tone, responding to other users, and the management of multiple platforms. In the 2016 survey of law enforcement use of social media, 85 percent of responding agencies reported using humor and nearly 90 percent reported using an informal tone in their social media posts at least some of the time (Kim, Oglesby-Neal, and Mohr 2017). Additionally, 86 percent of agencies reported responding to

other users' comments and/or questions, although 34 percent reported that they don't respond to negative comments. Nineteen percent of agencies reported that they use more than one Twitter account, which can be useful for engaging a variety of audiences, and dashboards for managing multiple accounts were the most requested tool (Kim, Oglesby-Neal, and Mohr 2017). Internal agency guidelines can aid in ensuring that these specific practices support the overarching objectives outlined in the formal policy.

Training is an important aspect of effective social media practice, especially for officers tasked with representing the department online (IACP 2014). While some formal policies include general language on training, internal guidelines can provide further guidance on content and recipients of training. Agencies should also consider providing training(s) on the department's social media policy once it is developed. Guidelines regarding training can be especially helpful for agencies looking to use social media to engage the community: in the 2016 survey of law enforcement use of social media, "engaging the community" was the training topic identified as most valuable (Kim, Oglesby-Neal, and Mohr 2017). Similarly, approval for social media posts is sometimes included in formal policies—it was mentioned in more than two-thirds of the social media policies we analyzed—but internal guidelines can be useful for expanding on the approval process. Agencies responding to the 2016 survey were split on their social media content approval processes, with 55 percent reporting that content was approved by a central group and 44 percent reporting that content was not approved by a central group (Kim, Oglesby-Neal, and Mohr 2017). It should be noted, however, that expanding on the approval process may or may not be feasible or necessary, depending on how social media engagement is encouraged among officers.

Use Insights from Other Fields

In addition to law enforcement-specific guidance, a number of resources exist from other fields providing insight into how to create effective policies and guidance that facilitate the use of social media for community engagement. These resources have information on best practices and considerations from other fields, which can be used to further enhance a law enforcement agency's social media policy. Other government agencies often share similar priorities and concerns about using social media to engage the community and thus can provide insights that can be used and adapted for law enforcement agencies. For example, the National League of Cities' *Building Local Government Social Media Policies* covers many of the topics discussed previously in this brief, but it also includes specific guidance about the advantages and disadvantages of allowing public commentary on social media and how to create policies and guidance that most effectively maximize potential benefits while avoiding risks. For example, the report suggests that agencies create a public comment policy that outlines how the agency will monitor, respond to, and, when necessary, remove content. Additionally, agencies should provide guidelines that outline procedures and assign responsibility for monitoring and responding to content in accordance with the written policy.

Guidance for the private sector can provide some helpful insights for law enforcement agencies as well, as commercial businesses are often particularly focused on interacting with and appealing to people in the community. For example, Vertical Measures' *A Guide to Developing Your Social Media*

Policies has a list of considerations specifically for engagement, including responses to negative posts, frequency of posting, and tone—topics that would benefit from being addressed through internal guidelines in law enforcement agencies. Additionally, Brian Solis' *The Rules of Social Media Engagement* includes the 25 Best Practices for Drafting Policies and Guidelines. With consideration of the key differences between law enforcement and private business use of social media, these resources can help law enforcement agencies further develop internal guidance surrounding community engagement.

Example of Adapting to Promote Community Engagement

When developing guidelines for an agency's use of social media, there are important considerations when choosing content to share on social media. An informal interview with a police chief about his use of Twitter serves as an example for how listening to the public can make content better and more engaging. This chief explained how he developed a hashtag about the meal a person receives after booking, and how he would use this hashtag after tweeting about an incident where someone was arrested. Several community members found this hashtag insensitive, and upon learning this, he stopped using it. Being receptive and considerate of community feedback on an agency's social media content and tone is an essential part of using social media as a community engagement tool.

Periodically Review the Policy and Guidelines

Like any policing practice that evolves over time, how an agency first used social media may be different from how the agency uses it now, and how the agency will use it several years from now. As noted in the above example, soliciting and incorporating information from the community can play a role in ensuring that policies and guidelines are allowing the agency to use social media to most effectively meet community needs. Policies should be periodically reviewed and kept up-to-date in order to most accurately reflect an agency's objectives for its social media usage, and guidelines should be adjusted to most effectively support those objectives. Such reviews will help ensure that social media is being used appropriately and effectively. This is important to ensure not only that the agency is adhering to its own standards, but that policies adhere to national standards and legal requirements. For example, the National Labor Relations Board, an independent federal agency charged with enforcing the National Labor Relations Act, has issued guidelines for acceptable social media policies that ensure employees' rights are protected, and guidelines and requirements are updated periodically based on recent cases.[3] Additionally, as technology evolves, social media policies should be updated. For example, agencies might want to reexamine their social media policies as new social media platforms emerge. In all, it is important for law enforcement agencies to be attuned to both internal and external evolutions and update their social media policies as necessary.

Takeaways

Having policies and guidelines can help departments more effectively engage the community while avoiding risks or issues that can come with social media use. There are many resources available to help develop a policy or tailor a policy to specific objectives like investigations or vetting candidates. Our analysis of a sample of policies revealed that they can encompass over a dozen topics but often do not include specific social media practices or procedures. To create a comprehensive social media strategy that achieves an agency's objectives, it is important to have a robust social media policy and clear guidelines that help put the policy into practice. Routinely updating the policies and guidelines further ensures that the agency's social media use continues to meet its needs. Establishing clear and effective policies and procedures can allow law enforcement agencies to harness the power of social media as a tool to promote community engagement.

Appendix. Resources

Title	Organization	Summary
Policy Development	IACP	Provides five key policy considerations for a law enforcement or government agency creating a social media policy.
Ingredients of a Solid Social Media Policy for Law Enforcement Agencies	ConnectedCOPS	Gives guidance for law enforcement agencies creating social media policies, including a list of necessary components to include and other topics that should be addressed.
Update on Social Media Policies for Law Enforcement	ConnectedCOPS	Additional insights on social media policies.
Model Social Media Policy	IACP	A model social media policy that can be adapted to fit a law enforcement agency.
Social Media Policy Template for Law Enforcement	Archive Social	A model social media policy that can be adapted to fit a law enforcement agency.
Developing a Policy on the Use of Social Media in Intelligence and Investigative Activities	Global Justice Information Sharing Initiative	Provides guidance and recommendations to law enforcement agencies looking to use social media to enhance investigations. Includes recommended social media policy elements.
Developing a Cybervetting Strategy for Law Enforcement	IACP	Gives recommendations for developing policies and guidance surrounding the use of social media in cybervetting, including preemployment screening and post-hire monitoring.
Building Local Government Social Media Policies	National League of Cities	Provides guidance for local governments looking to increase their use of social media and develop a social media policy.
A Guide to Developing Your Social Media Engagement Policy	Vertical Measures	Summarizes the potential of social media to help businesses engage with their customers and gives recommendations for companies looking to develop a social media policy.
The Rules of Social Media Engagement	Brian Solis	Outlines considerations for businesses using social media and includes "The Top 25 Best Practices for Drafting Policies and Guidelines."

Notes

1   See also the IACP Policy Center resource on social media, https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/social-media.

2   Seattle Police Department, Directive 15-00007 § 5.125. Social Media, available at https://policerecordsmanagement.com/2015/03/new-seattle-police-social-media-policy/.

3   "NLRB Guidelines for Acceptable Social Media Policies." Clark-Mortenson Insurance, 2015, available at https://www.clarkmortenson.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Acceptable_Social_Media_Policies.pdf.

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