

Professional Reference Directory



Chapter: 3 Standards of Conduct

Section: 3.16

Title: Use of Social Media

Date: 02/01/2021

Purpose: To establish the Department's position on the utility and management of social media and provide guidance on its management, administration, and oversight by Department personnel both on-duty in the course of their official duties and off-duty when identified as members of the organization.

I. POLICY

It is West Hartford Police Department policy that all personnel use computers, computer applications, computer programs, Internet resources, and network/Internet communications in a responsible, professional, ethical, and lawful manner. Department employees are prohibited from posting, transmitting, and/or disseminating any photographs, video or audio recordings, likenesses or images of department logos, emblems, uniforms, badges, patches, marked or unmarked vehicles, equipment, or other material that specifically identifies the Department, on any personal or social networking website or web page, without express written permission of the Chief of Police or designee.

All existing laws, rules, regulations, and directives that govern on and off-duty conduct are applicable to conduct associated with social media and networking. When engaging in social networking, employees will strictly adhere to all existing federal, state, local laws, and policies of the West Hartford Police Department, and laws regarding public information on arrests, investigations, and personnel data.

II. DEFINITIONS

Page: The specific portion of a social media website where content is displayed, and managed by an individual or individuals with administrator rights.

Profile: Information that a user provides about himself or herself on a social networking or similar site.

Social Media: A web-based system that enables people to interact with one another online via user-generated content, messaging, and other interactive tools. This includes, but is not limited to, social networking sites, blogs and microblogging sites, photo and video sharing sites, wikis, and news sites that permit user contributed content.

Speech: Expression or communication of thoughts or opinions in spoken words, in writing, by expressive conduct, symbolism, photographs, videotape, or related forms of communication.

III. PROCEDURE

Where the West Hartford Police Department uses social media to advance the purposes and goals of the organization, the following procedures shall apply to these officially sanctioned uses:

A. General Operating Procedures for Department-Sanctioned Use of Social Media

1. All Department social media sites or pages shall be approved by the Chief of Police or his or her designee and shall be administered by the Departmental Information Technology Section or as otherwise determined.
2. Where possible, each social media page shall include an introductory statement that clearly specifies the purpose and scope of the agency's presence on the website.
3. Where possible, social media pages shall clearly indicate they are maintained by the Department and shall have Department contact information prominently displayed.
4. When appropriate, the page(s) should link to the Department's official website.
5. Social media page(s) should be designed for the target audience(s) such as youth or potential police recruits.
6. Social media content shall adhere to applicable laws, regulations, and policies, including all information technology and records management policies, as well as public records laws.
7. Pages shall clearly indicate that posted comments will be monitored and that the Department reserves the right to remove obscenities, off-topic comments, and personal attacks.

B. Conduct During Department-Sanctioned Use of Social Media

When representing the Department via social media outlets:

1. Employees shall conduct themselves at all times as representatives of the Department and, accordingly, shall adhere to all Department standards of conduct and observe conventionally accepted protocols and proper decorum.
2. Employees shall identify themselves as a member of the Department unless law-enforcement purposes dictate otherwise.
3. Employees shall not make statements about the guilt or innocence of any suspect or arrestee, or comments concerning pending prosecutions, nor post, transmit, or otherwise disseminate confidential information, including photographs or videos, related to Department training, activities, or work-related assignments without express written permission.
4. Employees shall not conduct private business.
5. The use of Department computers by Department personnel to access personal social media is prohibited without authorization.
6. Department personnel use of personally owned devices to manage the Department's social media activities or in the course of official duties is prohibited without express written permission.
7. The Town of West Hartford monitors all employee use of town computers and other electronic devices, including employee blogging and social networking activity. An employee should have no expectation of personal privacy in any communication or post made through social media while using a town-provided computer, cellular telephones or other data devices.

8. Employees shall observe and abide by all copyright, trademark, and service mark restrictions in posting materials to electronic media.

C. Recognized Uses for a Department-Sanctioned Social Media Presence

1. Social media is a valuable investigative tool when seeking evidence or information about:
 - Missing persons
 - Wanted persons
 - Crimes perpetrated online (i.e., cyberbullying, cyberstalking)
 - Photos or videos of a crime posted by a participant or observer.
2. Social media can be used for community outreach and engagement by:
 - Providing crime prevention tips
 - Offering online reporting opportunities
 - Sharing crime maps and data
 - Soliciting tips about unsolved crimes
 - Informing the public of outreach events
3. Social media can be used to make time-sensitive notifications related to:
 - Road closures
 - Special events
 - Weather emergencies
 - Missing or endangered persons.

D. Personal Use of Social Media

Barring state law or binding employment contracts to the contrary, Department personnel shall abide by 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 working relationships of this Department for which loyalty and confidentiality are important, impede the performance of duties, impair discipline and harmony among coworkers, or negatively affect the public perception of the Department.
2. Department personnel shall not post, transmit, or otherwise disseminate any information to which they have access to as a result of their employment without written permission from the Chief of Police or his or her designee.
3. For safety and security reasons, Department personnel shall not disclose sensitive information related to their employment with this Department nor shall they post information pertaining to any other member of the Department without their permission.
4. When using social media, Department personnel should be mindful that their speech becomes part of the worldwide electronic domain. Therefore, adherence to the Department's Code of Conduct is required in the personal use of social media. In particular, Department personnel are prohibited from the following:
 - Speech containing obscene or sexually explicit language, images, or acts and statements or other forms of speech that ridicule, malign, disparage, or

otherwise express bias against any race, any religion, or any protected class of individuals.

- Speech involving themselves or other Department personnel reflecting behavior that would reasonably be considered engaging in conduct that undermines the public confidence¹.
5. Engaging in prohibited speech noted herein, may provide grounds for undermining or impeaching an officer's otherwise credible testimony in criminal proceedings. Department personnel thus sanctioned are subject to discipline up to and including termination of office.
 6. Department personnel may not divulge information gained by reason of their authority; make any statements, speeches, appearances, and endorsements; or publish materials that could reasonably be considered to represent the views or positions of this Department without express authorization.
 7. Employees should be aware that there is no reasonable expectation of privacy when engaging in social networking online. As such, the content of social networking websites may be obtained for use in criminal trials, civil proceedings, and departmental investigations. Such content may have a detrimental impact on criminal investigations or judicial proceedings.
 8. Except in the performance of an authorized duty, employees may not use Department computers to access social networking sites, blogs, bulletin boards, or similar media.
 9. Except in the performance of an authorized duty, employees shall not post, transmit, reproduce, and/or disseminate information (texts, pictures, video, audio, etc.) to the internet or any other public forum that would tend to discredit the Department or any of the Department's employees.
 10. Employees having personal web pages shall not use their uniform, patch, badge, rank, title, or position in a manner that would suggest that they are representing the interests or official position of the police department.
 11. Photographs of the inside of the police building as well as any crime or accident scene shall not be posted without consent of the Chief of Police.
 12. When engaging in the personal use of social media, employees shall not post any text, photograph, audio, video, illustration, or any other multimedia file related to or depicting any of the following:
 - Current, past, or pending departmental investigation.
 - Criminal or civil proceeding pertaining to, or arising from, any matter involving the department, including allegations of misconduct.
 - Brandishing any town owned weaponry, actual or simulated, or any contraband whether actual or simulated in an improper or reckless manner.

¹ * *Public Act 20-1, CGS 7-294d, Sec. 3(a) (24) (g) (2): examples of conduct that undermines public confidence in law enforcement. (POSTC authority for police officer certification)*

- Brandishing any tactical instrument, including, but not limited to: firearms, ASP, baton, OC spray, electrical control weapon, and/or mechanical restraints in an improper or reckless manner.

13. Posting the following types of criminal justice information to social networking sites is explicitly prohibited:

- Confidential, sensitive, or copyrighted information to which you have access due to your employment with the Town;
- Law Enforcement sensitive information accessible on investigative sharing networks such as CTIC, C4 or SLACK, etc;
- Data from an ongoing criminal or administrative investigation including photographs, videos, or audio recordings to include body camera and in-car camera footage;
- Photographs of suspects, arrestees or evidence;
- Personal statements about an on-duty use of force incident; and/or
- Comments related to pending prosecutions.

E. Approval Process

1. Employees are reminded that personal views, comments, opinions and depictions are not reflective of the position of the Town of West Hartford or the Police Department. Any such activity is considered outside of this policy.
2. Permission to represent the Department on social media must be approved by the Chief of Police prior to any such representation is made. Public Information Officers are generally authorized to speak on behalf of the Department with the Chief or Assistant Chief(s) oversight and review.

The West Hartford Police Department reserves the right to access, audit and disclose, for whatever reason, all content, messages, photographs, videos, and any other information created, transmitted or received via the use of any equipment issued or maintained by the Department. This includes, but is not limited to, records of all key strokes or web-browsing history made at any department computer, any Department cellular telephone, Mobile Data Terminal or over any department network.