

Social Media Policy

Purpose/objective

Although social media represents a positive technological development because it facilitates communication, it also creates unique issues that need to be formally addressed by Cook County in a policy format.

Cook County has an obvious interest in regulating the type of information that is disseminated on behalf of the county via social media and regulating on a more limited basis employee use of personal social media accounts.

The purpose of this social media policy is to address the means, method and rules governing the internal and external use of social media.

Definition

“Authorized users” or “authorized user” for purposes of this policy are those county employees occupying the positions identified in the “Authorized Users” portion of this policy.

“County employee” or “County employees” shall have the same meaning as provided for in Section 2 of the Cook County Procedures and Policy Manual. It shall not include individuals performing activities while in the course and scope of working or volunteering for a county constitutional officer.

“Employee” or “employees” shall be synonymous with “County employee” and “County employees”

“Social media” for purposes of this policy includes forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos). Contemporary examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Instagram.

“Unauthorized users” or “unauthorized user” for purposes of this policy are those county employees who do not meet the definition of “Authorized Users.”

“Work hours” for nonexempt employees shall mean when they are clocked-in for work. For exempt employees, “work hours” shall mean the hours between 9am and 5pm on those days they have reported to work.

Authorized Users

Posts to social media could potentially be injurious to the county's interests. For example, posts could communicate incorrect information that misleads the public, disclose private or confidential information and/or result in harassment and defamation. As a result, only authorized users shall be allowed to post to any of the county's social media accounts.

For purposes of this policy, the individuals occupying the following positions are authorized to post to the any of the county's social media accounts: County Administrator, County Clerk, _____, _____, _____.

An authorized user when posting shall identify himself or herself in such a manner that the poster's identity is known to the public and the county administration.

With the exception of the County Administrator, authorized users are not permitted to delegate the power to post to a subordinate or designee.

Unauthorized Users

The County Clerk shall be responsible for monitoring posts on a weekly basis to ascertain whether any unauthorized users have posted to any of the county's social media accounts.

An unauthorized user's first violation of this Policy may result in immediate discharge consistent with the Cook County Procedures and Policy Manual.

Authorized forms of social media

The county's social media use will be limited to Facebook and Twitter accounts. To the extent that the county has not created either or any of those accounts, the County Administrator or his/her designee shall on a timely basis create the account(s) on behalf of the county during work hours.

Authorized topics for social media posts

It is difficult to identify all of the proper uses of the county's social media accounts. The following are illustrative examples of the type of information that can be posted via one of the county's social media accounts:

- Crisis communication
- Weather alerts
- Traffic information
- The effective dates of newly enacted ordinances

-Job vacancies

Guidelines for authorized users

Authorized users shall follow the following guidelines when posting:

-posts shall be professional

-posts shall be accurate

-errors shall be corrected on a timely basis

-subsequent posts that correct errors shall identify the original error

-posts shall be within the authorized user's area of expertise/responsibility

-posts shall not communicate information about actual or potential claims and litigation involving the county

-posts shall not implicate the intellectual property of others, without written permission.

-posts shall not include photographs of employees or members of the public, without written permission

-posts shall not include defamatory material

-posts shall not contain any personal, sensitive or confidential information about anyone

-posts shall not include obscene, pornographic or other offensive/illegal materials or links

-posts shall not include racist, sexist, and other disparaging language about a group of people

-posts shall not include sexual comments about, or directed to, anyone

-posts shall not include political campaign materials or comments

-posts shall not include threatening or harassing comments

-posts shall not include information that is exempt from public disclosure pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 50-18-72.

Open Records Act

Cook County takes the position that posts by authorized users to the county's social media accounts are subject to the Open Records Act. Because the county does not have ultimate control over social media accounts operated by third parties, the county requires for archiving purposes all authorized users to contemporaneously print a screenshot of all posts and, at the end of each month, forward the printed screenshots to the County Clerk for placement in a file labeled "Social Media Posts."

The county clerk shall be responsible for maintaining the "Social Media Posts" file.

The County Clerk shall contemporaneously place all posts initiated by him/her in the "Social Media Posts" file.

Public Comments

Although citizen input and feedback is the cornerstone of a successful democracy, the First Amendment severely limits the county's ability to regulate speech. In a social media setting, the county will have limited ability to delete speech that may be offensive to significant portions of the public. Moreover, although public comments on the county's social media accounts are arguably accessible public records, the county's ability to access those records is limited because third parties have ultimate control over the county's social media accounts. To address these issues, the county's social media accounts will be configured to prevent replies from the public.

To facilitate citizen feedback concerning posts to the county's social media accounts, the county shall create an email account that is dedicated to receiving citizen feedback to posts appearing on the county's social media accounts. The email address for that dedicated account shall be prominently displayed on the county's social media accounts.

The county's social media accounts shall communicate that emergency situations should be communicated to the county via the 911 reporting system.

Guidelines for employee use of personal social media accounts

Many county employees have personal social media accounts that they use to interact with friends and family. They also may participate in professional social media, such as LinkedIn, that are related to their work or profession, but are not owned, endorsed or operated by the county and are not part of their county jobs.

Employees shall not be permitted to post to their personal social media accounts during work hours.

At no time shall employees use the county's internet infrastructure for postings to personal social media accounts.

Posts by employees to their personal social media accounts relating to Cook County government or their county employment could needlessly subject the county and the taxpayers to liability under the Fair Labor Standards Act. To avoid punishment for engaging in unauthorized work as set forth in the Cook County Procedures and Policy Manual, nonexempt employees are encouraged to include a disclaimer on all such posts to the effect that the posts are being communicated in their capacities as citizens and do not reflect the views or positions of Cook County government.