

# **COVINGTON POLICE DEPARTMENT STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE**

**Subject: SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**

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## **I. Purpose**

To establish procedures and guidelines for the usage of social networking sites by employees of the Covington Police Department.

Additionally, since the functions of a police department have a major impact upon the community, standards of conduct for police personnel are higher than standards applied to the general public. In this regard, police personnel will conduct themselves in a manner which does not bring discredit upon individuals, the Department, the City of Covington, or the community when utilizing social networking sites on and off duty. Any publication, through any medium which is potentially adverse to this operation, morale, or efficiency of this agency will be deemed a violation of this policy.

## **II. Statement of Policy**

It shall be the policy of the Covington Police Department to acknowledge that employees have a right to have personal web pages or sites and to encourage employees to exercise that right to the extent possible without causing a decline in public confidence and respect for the Department or the employee as a member of the Department. As such, the Department shall impose restrictions and oversight, when direct or indirect reference to the Police Department or its employees is made within these forums. It shall be the policy of the Department that all employees will adhere to the procedures and guidelines outlined in this policy.

## **III. Definitions**

**Blog** – A blog (short for web-log) is a personal online journal that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs are defined by their format: a series of entries posted to a single page in reverse-chronological order. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or reflect the purpose of the Website that hosts the blog. Topics sometimes include brief philosophical musings, commentary on Internet and other social issues, and links to other sites the author favors, especially those that support a point being made on a post.

**Social Networking Site** – A social networking site can be defined as web-based services that allow individuals to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, and/or (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and/or (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the

system, and/or (d) a site that provides a virtual community for people interested in a particular subject or just to “hang out” together, and/or (e) create their own online “profile” with biographical data, pictures, likes, dislikes and any other information they choose to post, and/or (f) communicate with each other by voice, chat, instant message, videoconference and blogs, and/or (g) the service typically provides a way for members to contact friends of other members. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. These social networking sites include, but are not limited to FaceBook, MySpace, Twitter, all blogs and others.

#### **IV. Procedures**

- A. All personnel are prohibited from posting, placing or having posted or placed by a third party any information relating to their duties or any information they have learned as a result of their duties as an employee of the Covington Police Department on any social networking site or identify themselves directly or indirectly as an employee of the Covington Police Department. This prohibition shall include, but not be limited to:
  - 1. The posting of any pictures, video, audio, comments, discussion, or other digital technology media of any incident, inquiry, investigation, or all other information relating to the Covington Police Department.
  - 2. The posting of any pictures, audio, or video of any article of clothing or equipment owned, issued or controlled by the Covington Police Department. This shall include any pictures of any officer whether on or off duty in any part of his/her police uniform or equipment. This shall also include any pictures, images or artwork of any Covington Police patch or logo unless the posting of such picture or image is granted upon the approval of the Chief of Police.
- B. All personnel are prohibited from updating, posting any comments, pictures, video, audio, or responding in any way to any comments or inquiries to any social networking site, including their own, while on duty unless it is related to an investigation in which a supervisor has knowledge of and has approved this investigative technique.
- C. Employees shall not post any material that is violent, sexually explicit, racially or ethnically derogatory, discredits or tarnishes the image of the Department, individuals with the Department, the City of Covington or the community, or show a negative bias to one gender. This restriction shall not prohibit any posting of material that is legitimate public speech involving a matter of genuine public concern.
- D. The Covington Police Department utilizes a variety of applications to collect photographs, video, and audio recordings and officers often own personal equipment that has this same ability to collect and/or store digital technology.
  - 1. All pictures, audio or video recorded, collected, captured, or stored by an officer during an officer’s tour of duty, which is related to any official business of the City of Covington and/or specifically the officer’s duty, is the property of the Covington Police Department whether the employee utilizes departmental equipment or equipment owned by the officer or another person. The officer shall ensure that digital technology collected as evidence or digital technology that has or may have evidentiary value is treated, collected, stored, and documented as evidence, in accordance

with SOP I065. The storing of digital technology that was collected as evidence shall not be saved on personally owned digital equipment or in any other manner, once it has been properly saved and logged as evidence.

2. All pictures, audio, or video recorded, collected, captured, or stored by an officer during an officer's tour of duty, which is related to any official business of the City of Covington and/or specifically the officer's duty shall not be forwarded or provided in any manner to any person without the approval of a Division Commander or the Chief of Police. The release or forwarding of pictures or audio or video recordings to the D. A.'s Office upon its request is permissible.
3. All employees must be aware that the use of personally owned equipment to collect digital technology may be considered evidence and the equipment or its contents may be inspected, seized, or held as evidence as necessary.

E. New Employees

All candidates seeking employment with this department shall be required to disclose on their background booklet their participation in any social networking sites. This disclosure shall include the name of the sites. The candidate shall provide the department with access to their site as part of the background investigation for employment with the City of Covington. Information obtained on a candidate concerning their postings, photographs or comments on a social networking site will be considered along with all other background information to determine eligibility for employment.

F. Administrative Investigations

Employees who are subject to administrative investigations may be ordered to provide the department with access to the social networking site when the focus of the investigation is directly, narrowly, and specifically related to the employee's alleged misconduct or when the subject of the investigation is potentially adverse to the operation, morale, or efficiency of the department.

G. Off Duty Conduct

1. Social Networking Sites

Employees of the Covington Police Department are held to the highest ethical standard, which is an inherent part of the law enforcement profession. An officer's conduct, both on and off duty, is the means by which the officer and the police department's reputation are measured. Officers must maintain high standards of professional and personal conduct at all times. Employees utilizing, posting pictures/audio/video, commenting, or creating a social networking site(s), blogs, and comment oriented websites, must conduct themselves at all times in a manner so as to not bring embarrassment, disgrace, or doubt as to their credibility as an impartial police officer or employee of the Covington Police Department, or does not bring discredit upon individuals, the Department, the City of Covington or the community. **It is critical for employees to understand that statements posted by the employee on a social networking site that are misleading, false, or coercive**

**may be used to challenge the veracity or impeach the credibility of the employee in any legal proceeding.**

2. Digital Technology

Covington Police Department employees will often find that their status as a police employee or their duty to act as a police officer while off duty enables them to view, assist, or become involved in critical incidents. When this occurs, officers shall conduct themselves in accordance with this policy in terms of their use of digital technology in the same manner as if they were on duty.

3. Working Environment

Employees of the Covington Police Department, while on or off duty, shall never utilize digital technology, blogs, or social networking sites to harass, belittle or criticize an employee or another person in any manner. The posting of any digital technology to a social networking site or forwarding or sending an email(s) that criticizes, ridicules, or otherwise may potentially embarrass or disgrace another employee or person is prohibited. This shall also include the altering or editing of digital technology that harasses, belittles, or criticizes an employee in any manner.

4. Privacy

Employees should be aware that they may be jeopardizing their personal confidentiality and/or that of other employees by posting photographs or personal information about themselves or other members of the Covington Police Department. In addition, they may be jeopardizing their safety, the safety of their family, their co-workers, and on-going or future investigations. In addition, employees are advised that in the event information has been posted on a social networking site identifying themselves as a police officer, the posting could make them ineligible for specialized assignments where anonymity is required.

***This SOP supersedes any SOP previously issued.***

BY ORDER OF THE CHIEF OF POLICE:

*Stacey L. Cotton*

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Chief of Police