
	TRAVIS COUNTY ESD #5 MANCHACA FIRE RESCUE Department Policy / Best Practices	X104
	Authorized by: 	Effective: 3/4/2025
	Fire Chief Chris Barron	Rescinds: N/A
	Social Media Use and Electronic Communications	Reference: Application: All Personnel

I. Purpose

The District acknowledges that improper use of social media may negatively affect the Fire Department’s ability to efficiently and effectively provide fire and life safety services to the community we serve. Therefore, this Policy provides guidance to all District personnel, sworn and civilian, by clarifying the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate use of social media by District personnel in alignment with the mission of the District.

II. Background

Travis County Emergency Services District #5 endorses the secure use of social media to enhance communication, collaboration, and information exchange; streamline processes; and foster productivity. Likewise, the District acknowledges its employees’ right to speak on matters of public interest in ways that do not interfere with workplace efficiency or the District’s ability to effectively serve the public. This policy establishes the Department’s position on the use and management of social media maintained by the District and the use of social media privately maintained by an employee. This policy provides guidance on the use of both. This policy is not meant to address one particular form of social media but rather all social media in general, as changing technology may outpace our ability to update policies governing its use. This policy is not meant to inhibit First Amendment rights of any member of the Department acting as a private citizen in accordance with state and federal court decisions.

Social media provides a valuable means of assisting the Department and its members in meeting community outreach, problem-solving, investigation, recruitment, community risk reduction, fire and life safety education, and related organizational and community objectives. The personal use of social media can have an effect on Department members in their official capacity, either as individuals or on the Department as a whole.

III. Terminology

The environment of social media is constantly changing as new technology and uses are developed. This policy is meant to include, but not be limited to, any social media interaction, such as “Post”, “Story”, “Reel”, “Profile”, “Comment”, “Thread”, as well as “likes” and other non-verbal expressions or actions on

an internet-based site that is accessible by the public , and does not exclude any future social media interactions/terminology that have not yet come into common usage.

Electronic communications are not social media and include, but are not limited to, electronic mail, texts, and other electronic messaging media on which communications are directed to or among a limited or closed set of persons.

IV. General

The District recognizes the role that social media plays in employees' personal lives. As such, this Policy also provides guidance of a precautionary nature, and restrictions and prohibitions on the use of social media by District personnel, whether at work or outside of work, regardless of the ownership of the device with which the information is being captured, stored and/or shared and regardless whether the social media site is controlled by the District. Violation of any portion of this Policy may result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

A social medium that is not maintained by the District in the District's name is considered personal use, and each individual is personally responsible – and potentially liable – for whatever is posted.

1. Use by District personnel of a District-issued or District-owned communication messaging device and/or District-provided internet connection to access social media or the internet, whether at work or outside of work, is subject to monitoring by the District. Employees have no reasonable expectation of privacy in the information transmitted by that equipment or connection, regardless of whether or not the employee is receiving a financial stipend for the device or service. Each employee consents to such monitoring by the District as a condition to use of such District-owned or supplied resources.
2. Information that is in furtherance of District business but shared via personal electronic message options (text, personal e-mail, other electronic communication media) constitutes public information and is subject to public information requests and open records laws. This applies to District and non-District owned devices. All such communications pertaining to District business must be forwarded to a District maintained electronic communication storage facility if not initiated or received through such a storage facility owned and maintained by the District.
3. No District employee shall be actively engaged in any form of social media, or using a camera or electronic device during the entirety of any dispatched emergency event or detail, from the time of such dispatch or detail, until such a time as the apparatus is marked back in service and at the station. The exception to this would be anyone who is required to use a camera or electronic device to properly perform their job function, such as Public Information Officer (PIO), Arson Investigator and Safety Officer or at the request of the PIO, Incident Commander, or the Fire Chief or their designee(s).
 - Exception: Using a camera or electronic device when necessary for the effective execution of emergency operations.
4. No District personnel have the authorization to speak on behalf of the District unless permission has specifically been granted by the Fire Chief, the Fire Chief's Designee, or PIO. Social media posts, on behalf of the District that are not authorized will be required to be removed by the authority of the Fire Chief.

5. District personnel are prohibited from creating or using a personal social media page or profile on any platform that references Manchaca Fire Rescue, MFR, ESD5, Travis County Emergency Services District No.5 or any other words that fairly refer to the District, or that includes photos of District property such as the Station, apparatus, uniforms, gear or tools in the photo, except as otherwise permitted by applicable law with regard to communications regarding matters of public concern. The use of helmet cams by District personnel while on duty is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the Fire Chief. Photos that include any District owned property are strictly prohibited from publication on any media platform other than the official District social media pages without express written permission of the Fire Chief, the Fire Chief's Designee or the PIO. District personnel are prohibited from using an official department photo as their profile picture on their personal social media pages or profiles.
 - a. Social Media Page: a public profile created for businesses, organizations, public figures, brands, or causes. Pages are not typically associated with individual people who are not public figures.
 - b. Social Media Profile: an individual user's personal account associated with a real person.
 - c. Exceptions:
 1. Social media pages that have previously been pre-approved by the Fire Chief.
 2. District personnel are permitted to re-post or share the posts from official District accounts to their personal social media, subject to the regulations provided in this Policy.
6. Anyone riding along on any District apparatus is not permitted to record any District activities using a camera, or electronic device without first receiving prior written approval from the Fire Chief, the Fire Chief Designee or the PIO. District personnel are required to ensure compliance with this regulation. Electronic copies of any such images or recordings, being made after receiving prior written approval, will be provided to the District.
7. The District recognizes the importance of social media for its personnel and acknowledges that its personnel have the right, under the First Amendment and other applicable law, to engage in discourse about matters of public concern. This Policy is not intended to restrict such protected communications by District personnel while not on duty with the District.
8. Nevertheless, District personnel are reminded that speech is subject to reasonable restrictions. Whether at work/on-duty or off work/off-duty, speech related to official duties and responsibilities is not always protected under the First Amendment. District personnel are free to express themselves as private citizens as long as their speech does not impede the effective and efficient provision of services by the District to the public. It is impossible to describe every communication that may not be protected speech. Generally, such speech must pertain to a matter of public concern and not a matter of personal interest, and the employee's interest in the subject of the communication outweighs the District's interest in providing effective and efficient services to the public. The following is a non-exhaustive list of communications that may not be protected: Communication that: (i) impair the maintenance of discipline by supervisors or impair harmony among the speaker's co-workers; (ii) impede the performance of employee's duties; (iii) interfere in District operations; (iv) undermine the mission of the District; (v) conflict with the speaker's duties for the District; and (vi) constitute an abuse of authority and public accountability associated with the employee's role with the District. Therefore, some speech posted on personal social media that is lawfully discovered by the District may lead to disciplinary action against the employee as determined by the Fire Chief, or the Fire Chief Designee.

V. Publishing Images of the District or its Activities

The following rules are provided to clearly define the successful use of public media tools for all District personnel, whether at work/on-duty or off work/off-duty:

1. All District personnel must get prior permission from the Fire Chief or his/her designee to post images that contain identifiable District insignia, District-issued uniforms, or other images that signify the District on any social/digital media platform. Personnel may not, at any time, post images of District insignia or of themselves in their District-issued uniforms when the employee is engaging in off-duty activities. Employees should review the rules below for posting images while on-duty.
2. District personnel may not disclose confidential information regarding the department, and its members, or release confidential information, including information protected under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).
3. District personnel should not engage in speech that is false, deceptive, slanderous, lewd and lascivious, misleading or cause harm to others, including speech that constitutes harassment,. In doing so, the personnel may undermine the department, which may result in corrective or disciplinary action, up to termination.
4. When posting or engaging on personal social media in any way that indicates the employee's status as employee of the District, District personnel must maintain a level of professionalism and courtesy that is consistent with the District Policies and mission.
5. District personnel are responsible for all content they publish on their personal social/digital media profile or page and on any other social/digital media page by any means, such as comments, liking, sharing, retweeting, reposting and the like.
6. All digital images taken while on-duty, with or without the approval of the Fire Chief or his/her designee may constitute public records under Texas law. This includes but is not limited to: videos and photos from incidents, drills, activities within the station, District-sponsored activities, training, etc. A copy of all such digital images must be provided to the Fire Chief, the PIO or his/her designee.

VI. Authorized District Use of Social Media

The District provides for the secure use of social media via District-created and maintained social media pages to enhance communication, collaboration, and information exchange; streamline processes; and foster productivity.

The District identifies the potential uses of social media that may be evaluated and utilized as deemed necessary and reasonable by administrative and supervisory personnel. The following are guidelines for authorized District use of social media:

1. Authorized District websites or pages, social media or otherwise, shall be approved in advance by the Fire Chief, the Fire Chief's Designee or the PIO. The District will ensure the media meets all relevant standards, contains all required information, and remains appropriate, timely, and positively reflects the mission and brand of the District.

2. Content managers for authorized District websites or pages, social media or otherwise, shall provide all authorization information (usernames and passwords) to District's Administration Division, and an agent of the Administration Division must be named an administrator or person authorized to control content.
3. District social media content shall adhere to applicable laws, regulations, and policies of District, including all information technology and records management policies. The following content guidelines must be followed:
 - a. All content is subject to public information laws. Relevant records retention schedules apply to social media content.
 - b. Content must be managed, stored, and retrieved to comply with public information laws, and e-discovery laws and policies.
4. District images posted on social media and/or shared with the public must be taken on public property, whether on or off scene of an incident. No images shall be taken, posted, or shared from private property, unless the owner provides consent.
5. District social media communication information will be determined by the Fire Chief, the Fire Chief's Designee, or the PIO to be relevant and necessary and, at a minimum, should include the following:
 - a. Pages shall clearly state that the opinions expressed by visitors to the page(s) do not reflect the opinions of Manchaca Fire Rescue/Travis County Emergency Services District No. 5.
 - b. Pages shall clearly indicate that posted comments will be monitored and that the District reserves the right to remove obscenities, off-topic comments, personal attacks or any other comments that create an unintended or inaccurate association of the District with a particular political or religious program or organization, or that violates applicable law pertaining to advocacy for or against a candidate or measure in an election.
 - c. Pages shall clearly indicate they are maintained by the District and shall have District contact information prominently displayed.
 - d. Pages shall clearly indicate that any content posted or submitted for posting is subject to public disclosure.
 - e. Pages shall clearly indicate the process for filing public information requests and that social media communications are not to be used for emergency notification (i.e., call 911).
 - f. Pages shall link to the District's public comment Policy and indicate that use of the page is subject to the Policy.
6. District personnel representing the District via social media outlets shall do the following:
 - a. Conduct themselves at all times as representatives of the District and, accordingly, shall adhere to all District standards of conduct and observe conventionally accepted protocols and proper decorum.
 - b. Identify themselves as an employee or member of the District.
 - c. Not make statements or comments concerning pending District legal matters, nor post, transmit, or otherwise disseminate confidential information.
 - d. Not conduct political activities or private business or commercial activities.

VII. VIDEO OR DIGITAL IMAGES TAKEN DURING INCIDENTS

1. If at the request of the PIO, Incident Commander or Officer in Charge, video or photographs are taken on-scene for department social media use, they must be surrendered to the Fire Chief, the Fire Chief's Designee, or the PIO at the conclusion of the incident or sooner if appropriate.
2. The PIO, Incident Commander or Officer in Charge, may request video or photographs taken on scene for District training or use.
3. Under no circumstances should the capturing of photographs or video interfere with the primary mission of assigned duties.
4. District personnel, on-duty or off-duty, that take video or digital images during an incident, may not post or disseminate via any social media or any digital media not authorized by the District, Fire Chief, the Fire Chief's Designee or the PIO. Digital images obtained during incidents may be part of an investigation/evidence and subject to public records.
5. Digital images should be sent only to the PIO, the Fire Chief, or the Fire Chief's Designee for vetting and dissemination. The PIO reserves the right to utilize the images for the purpose of media use, education, training, community engagement and public relations.
6. In order to maintain consistency in messaging and style, approved digital images may be posted to official District social media accounts. Notwithstanding the prohibition on publication of District activities, personnel, and assets provided in this Policy, District personnel are permitted to re-post or share the (non-incident) posts from official District accounts to their personal social media, subject to the regulations of this Policy. No digital images taken during an incident, are to be posted on any other social media platforms other than official District accounts. District official accounts can be obtained from the District's PIO.

VIII. VIDEO OR DIGITAL IMAGES POSTED ON PERSONAL PAGES OR PROFILES

1. Personnel may, with the consent or permission of the Fire Chief, the PIO, or their designees, post on their personal social media pages or profiles images taken while on duty in their District-issued uniforms and/or that contain identifiable District insignia, but only if such images relate to non-incidents, or District-sponsored activities. Any consent or permission shall be subject to the following: If the employee chooses to engage in speech on his/her personal social media page or profile that advocates or endorses for or against any political belief, opinion, candidate, or measure, or if the employee engages in speech on his/her social media page or profile that would commonly be considered by some to be offensive or an abuse of authority or public trust vested in the person as an employee of the District, the employee may not post such images on the employee's personal social media profile or page.
2. All digital images taken while on-duty are subject to the department's Rules and Regulations and the District Uniform Standards for Sworn Personnel.

3. Any digital images taken while on-duty and posted on social/digital media that violate this Policy and/or any District Policy or Standard Operating Guidelines(SOGs) are subject to disciplinary action, up to termination.
4. Digital images taken while on-duty of District activities that are posted on social media by the employee after being given consent may not be altered by the employee in any manner, including but not limited to adding a soundtrack of music or other audio content.

IX. UNAUTHORIZED SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

1. The District will investigate any social media account found to make unauthorized use of the District's names, its brand, or any likeness of the department, including but not limited to identifiable employee names. Upon completion of the investigation, if the author is found to be a District employee, that employee will be required to comply with this Policy and remove any content found to be in violation of this Policy.

- i. Examples of unauthorized content: @ManchacaFirefighter,
@TCESD5FireFirefighter

VIDEO OR DIGITAL IMAGE SUBMISSION

1. District Personnel may submit video or digital images to the Fire Chief's Designee or PIO for review and dissemination.