**Social Media Policy**

The \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ County Health Department (Agency) understands that increasingly people are turning to social media for news and information. The Agency appreciates the importance of utilizing social media to foster engagement, expand its reach, increase two-way communication, and offer broad public access to credible, science-based health messages.

Social media messages are available to people when and where they want to receive information. By tapping into personal networks and encouraging conversation, messages can be spread rapidly and can affect behavior change. The perceived credibility of the information is also strengthened when messages are disseminated from multiple sources through various social media platforms.

For the purposes of this policy, social media is defined as Internet-based applications that enable people to communicate by freely sharing information and resources. This includes, but is not limited to, commonly used social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Flickr, Pinterest, Instagram, wikis, websites and blogs. The Agency utilizes social media on a regular basis to communicate with its audiences.

**Open or Closed Communication**

The Agency Administrator will determine in advance whether the Agency will use an open or closed approach to social media communication. The approach may be changed depending on the specific situation.

An open approach focuses on overall communication objectives. It allows employees more freedom to experiment and utilize opportunities as long as they are consistent with the objectives. It provides the greatest opportunity to build trust with communities through engagement. It can be implemented more quickly than the closed method, is more flexible, and is more responsive to the audience’s expectations. The disadvantage is that employees may make more mistakes, since there is less control over communication activities.

A closed approach limits the use of social media to a few designated employees using specific social media platforms in a prescribed way. It ensures consistency of the official message, and complies with command and control systems, however, it can take longer to implement, and may be less flexible and less responsive to the audience’s expectations.

**Emergency Social Media Use**

In an emergency, the Agency will utilize social media actively as a vital component of its overall crisis risk communication response. It will be used to provide timely, relevant, accurate and credible health and safety information to the public. The Agency will share information on what they are doing to respond, gather information from the social media community, and gauge the effectiveness of risk communication.

Research shows that social media users trust emergency information from their friends and family more than from any other source. By engaging the online audience, the Agency will seek to minimize their potential to impede Agency efforts and instead, maximize their contribution in order to empower individuals to take control of their situation. They will work to engage and leverage the resources of the entire community.

The Agency may also use social media to conduct virtual town hall meetings via “Twitter chats” or may crowdsource certain response capabilities in order to multiply resources. Crowdsourcing means soliciting contributions or assistance from a large group of people, particularly the online community, to obtain needed services, ideas or content.

**Social Media Principles**

The guiding principles of social media use for the Agency will include the following:

* Accounts officially set up with permission from the Administrator or Agency Incident Commander will be owned by the Agency, and their content will belong to the Agency. The Agency name will be clearly displayed on the account as the owner.
* Communication will be honest and transparent.
* Posts will convey a positive, professional spirit in line with the Agency’s mission.
* Communication will be respectful of persons, race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and culture.
* While the Agency seeks input from online audiences, comments from the public may be filtered and deleted or blocked if they contain language or images that are offensive, violent or discriminatory.
* Hashtags and keyword tagging will be used.
* The Agency will encourage the use of Tweak the Tweet protocol when developing message indexing and searching capability (<http://epic.cs.colorado.edu/?page_id=125>).
* The Agency will effort to protect consumers’ privacy following applicable Privacy Policies, IT policies and laws on how personally identifiable information is collected, stored, shared or used.
* Copyrights, trademarks, rights of publicity and other third‐party rights will be respected. Content will be used with permission and sources credited.
* Only those employees pre-approved by the Administrator, or the Agency Incident Commander will be authorized to post to social media on behalf of the organization.
* All employees authorized to utilize social media on behalf of the Agency must complete training before using social media.
* Before being posted or shared, questionable content will be verified with credible sources such as, but not limited to, the CDC, MoDHSS, DHHS, National Institutes of Health, American Academy of Pediatrics, FDA, Department of Natural Resources, and MO Department of Conservation.
* Posts and comments regarding political issues, sensitive matters, and emergency response activities require approval from the Administrator or Agency Incident Commander prior to publishing.
* Employees posting on behalf of the Agency will disclose their name and position in the Agency at the beginning of each conversation.
* A record of online Agency communication will be maintained in accordance with Chapters 109 or 610 RSMo, the Missouri Sunshine Law, and the Agency’s Records Retention Schedule.
* Social media strategies should integrate multiple modes of communication and should be optimized for mobile devices.

**Launching Social Media in Emergency Response**

To launch social media communications during a disaster, the Agency will develop an incident social media outreach plan (*see Social Media Plan Worksheet*) that includes the following components:

* Identify the outcome to achieve
* Establish and align communication priorities to incident objectives
* Be prepared to adapt how audiences are engaged
* Define hashtag conventions (i.e.  localize Twitter hashtags with the two-letter state abbreviation or the three-letter city airport code, followed by a hazard-specific abbreviation, e.g.: wx for weather; eq for earthquake; fire for fires; police or pd for police)
* Encourage use of Tweak the Tweet syntax
* Adjust pre-developed key messages and talking points
* Choose the social media platform that will best reach the primary audience
* Ensure available resources to manage the chosen platforms well
* Establish a support structure to help with data collection
* Establish news feeds (RSS), if manageable
* Leverage partners and volunteers
* Enlist support from social media volunteer groups such as the American Red Cross, CrisisCommons, Humanity Road, GIS Corps, and Standby Task Force
* Ensure monitoring for quick response to audience engagement

**Employee Conduct**

Employees of the Agency are viewed by the public as representatives of the Agency, whether on work or personal time. Therefore, personal social media outlets may be viewed by the public as a reflection on the Agency, even if the Agency is not specifically discussed. Many readers will assume employees are speaking on behalf of the Agency in their social media posts.

Employees should place a disclaimer in a prominent place on their personal social media sites, as follows, “I work at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, but content I post or share on this site reflects my personal opinions and interests, and does not necessarily reflect the views of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

Additionally, employees should abide by the following statements:

* Company social media accounts may not be used for personal communication.
* Employees may not use their personal social media accounts to conduct Agency business.
* Personal social media posting should not be done on company time.
* Employees must identify themselves clearly and disclose their connection to the Agency when posting about its products or services.
* Employees should keep usernames and passwords or Agency accounts private and should not share them, or allow their use by any other individual.
* Employees are subject to existing rules and regulations in the Agency Code of Conduct and Employee Handbook even while online.
* Employees should never use negative, inflammatory or discriminatory language in social media posts.
* Employees should remember that acknowledging or forwarding messages on any service may be perceived as supporting a specific cause or topic.
* Employees should not violate others’ intellectual property rights, and should use links and other methods to credit sources.
* Employees are encouraged to be aware of positive and negative comments about the Agency online, and share them with the Administrator or the Agency Incident Commander. Employees should not react or respond online to negative comments, unless authorized to do so by the Administrator or Agency Incident Commander.
* Employees should use sound judgment and commons sense when posting. They will be responsible for their own actions. Anything they post that can tarnish the Company’s image will be their own responsibility.
* Employees should remember that social media sites are not the forum for venting personal complaints about supervisors, co-workers, or the Agency.
* Employees should consider that statements made online are public and permanent. They should be factual, accurate, and appropriate. Mistakes should be corrected immediately and reported to the Administrator or Agency Incident Commander.
* Employees should never disclose non‐public information of the Agency, or identifying or personal information about any of its clients as described in HIPAA regulations.
* Employees should be aware that taking public positions online that are counter to the Agency’s mission, vision or interests might cause conflict.
* Employees should remember their online activity is a direct reflection on the Agency.
* Employees will keep records of any posts pertaining to the Agency and will provide a copy to the Administrator or the Agency Incident Commander.
* Employees should not make promises about future actions or programs that the Agency may not be able to fulfill.
* Employees may not use the Agency name, logo, email address or brand to set up social media properties without prior approval from the Administrator or Agency Incident Commander.

**Disciplinary Action**

The consequences for violating this social media policy or for making an inappropriate public disclosure, whether intentional or accidental, are severe. Employees will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment.

**Social Media Concerns**

The Agency anticipates concerns may arise in response to its social media engagement, especially during a disaster. It cannot anticipate every issue, but will seek to handle problems on a case by case basis. The following guidelines will apply:

* Employees will respond to cries for help via social media with a referral to the appropriate local agency or 9-1-1.
* Requests for personal information will be directed to call the Agency’s main telephone number for personal assistance.
* Employees will not engage in personal conversations with the online audience if personal medical information or identifiers are at risk of being disclosed. Individuals will be directed to call the Agency’s main telephone number for personal assistance.
* Employees will not be permitted to give medical advice via social media, but will direct the user to their health care provider for assistance.
* Authorized employees may be permitted to provide general public health and safety information, and should use the disclaimer “This site contains general information about medical conditions and treatments, intended to improve understanding of various health topics. The information provided here should not be considered as a substitute for seeking professional medical advice from a qualified health care provider.”
* Information provided by the online audience should be vetted, and not automatically assumed to be reliable enough to impact response operations.

**Evaluation**

Social media will be evaluated by the degree to which we meet the information needs of our online audience, and whether the expected outcomes are achieved.

Evaluation measures will include:

* number of subscribers,
* number of people engaging with content liking, sharing, commenting, or retweeting.
* third-party measures of social media influence, such as Klout, Twitter Analytics, Facebook Insights, Google Analytics, etc.
* documented stories of people who credit the Agency’s social media accounts with knowledge gained or actions taken during or after an event, and
* strategies that are working, and changes that need to be made to improve performance, grow network, and recognize expected actions.

Areas for improvement identified during evaluation will be included in the Agency’s improvement plan and implemented in future social media efforts.