HERTFORD COUNTY

External Communications Policy

08/06/2014

Policy outlining the guidelines for the use of Hertford County personnel in communicating with media outlets and with social networking.

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PURPOSE

Hertford County seeks to inform its residents, businesses, and visitors by engaging in proactive and interactive communications. Hertford County's External Communications Policy recognizes that the most effective and quickest method to communicate county policies and activities to the public is by working in partnership with the traditional news media, while also directly communicating with constituents through digital media platforms. Hertford County Government has an overriding interest and expectation in deciding what is "spoken" on behalf of Hertford County to the media and on social media sites, therefore, it is important that all agency communication tools be used in ways that provide clear communication, maximize transparency, maintain the security of the county network, and are appropriately professional.

This policy establishes guidelines for the use of Hertford County employees communicating with media and social media sites as a means of conveying significant information to its citizens. This policy addresses the following areas:

I.   **Officially recognized media**
II.   **Employee access and participation**
III.   **Records management and preservation**

OFFICIALLY USE MEDIA

Definitions

Broadcast/Print Media
The term "media" refers to all individuals and organizations who maintain print or broadcast vehicles for public consumption. This definition includes but is not limited to: newspapers, magazines, television, digital news feeds.

Social Media
The term "social media" refers to digital communication content created by individuals, using accessible, expandable, and upgradeable publishing technologies, through and on the Internet. Examples of social media include but are not limited to: Facebook, blogs, MySpace, RSS, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flicker, Google+, other social networking sites.

Broadcast/Print Media Requests

Routine Media Request

A routine media request is one that seeks <u>basic factual information. Examples include</u>:

- seeking general information about public events offered by libraries, parks, senior centers, public agencies, etc.;
- Seeking general information about programs or services offered;
- Other requests seeking information that is readily available and noncontroversial.

Non-Routine Media Request

A non-routine media request may be of a <u>sensitive or controversial</u> nature and include responses that require the interpretation of policy, employee records, and public record request for detailed records, legal action, or emergency situations. These types of issues often become headlines in the media and have the ability to become viral online. This provision provides the framework for the county's PIO (Public Information Officer) to respond appropriately and as soon as possible to these issues. County employees should notify the PIO immediately when a sensitive or controversial issue pertaining to operations of a county agency is identified, or when an emergency situation occurs (i.e. those that will have an impact on a large number of residents could potentially generate great media interest and those that involve high-profile individuals or agencies). County staff should not wait until there is media interest before contacting the PIO. Immediate notification is critical in order for the PIO to prepare for, and to respond to, media inquiries. In a crisis situation, the County Manager will communicate with the Sheriff, Emergency Management Coordinator and the County Attorney.

Sensitive or Controversial Issues may include, but are not limited to:

- Issues that may affect the county's public image or citizen confidence.
- Existing or potential threats to public safety, welfare, or property.
- Personnel issue regarding any county employee, such as performance evaluation, reasons for termination, reasons for not hiring, or harassment claims.
- Legal claims or lawsuits filed against Hertford County or any of its employees or agents.
- Sensitive and controversial issues of interest to the media may be best assessed by asking the following:
- Is the issue a threat, existing or potential, to life, health or property?
- Could the issue likely be interpreted to negatively affect public confidence in/or opinion of Hertford County government?
- Is the issue of particular interest to the general public?
- Are there legal ramifications, existing or potential, raised by the issue?
- Has more than one member of the media inquired about the same issue?
- Has someone threatened to go to the media about the issue?
- Is there unusual or inappropriate interest by a person or small group of people about a seemingly routine issue?

Social Media Use

Official county use of social media is intended to be county initiated communication to broaden the reach and engagement with the community and stakeholders, while utilizing fundamental platforms that offer methods of communicating beyond traditional sources of information such as broadcast/print media. Being an employee of Hertford County does not authorize a right to officially speak on behalf of Hertford County. Official spokespersons for the various media will be outlined within this document.

County Website

The County's website is to be used as a communications, awareness building, image enhancement tool for the county, as well as an online portal for government services. All county departments should utilize the website as an effective means to communicate with residents and targeted groups, including community leaders and organizations, local and potential businesses, current and potential residents, visitors, and county employees. The county website should showcase county accomplishments, educate the community about how government works, and encourage public participation in local government, as well as provide demographic and commercial information that supports business expansion and recruitment.

The county's website is coordinated by the Hertford County Webmaster. All requests for website design edits, new pages, and related content for posting public notices on the county's website will be routed through the Hertford County webmaster.

Department Heads are responsible for monitoring their respective areas to ensure accurate and timely information. Website submissions should meet the goals and expectations of the county as a whole. Content should fall within the parameters of county policies and state and federal law, including copyright laws.

Departments may not develop separate sites outside of the office county website (<u>with separate web addresses /URLs)</u> without explicit permission and authorization from the county manager.

Links to other websites will be limited to government or public agencies; local organizations that receive county funding; and commercial or non-profit websites that have a formal, distinct, and project-specific relationship with the County.

Social Networking

Official sites for Hertford County through social media and other digital applications carry the same weight as the county's official website and must be treated with the same respect. Emerging online collaboration platforms are fundamentally changing the way county government is able to work and engage with citizens and community partners. Social networking can improve interactivity between

government agencies and the public, and often reaches new and different populations from traditional media.

Where possible, social media pages shall clearly indicate they are maintained by the specific county department and shall have the department contact information prominently displayed. Where possible, social media pages should include the following statement: "The opinions expressed by visitors to this site do not reflect the opinions of Hertford County."

No confidential information shall be posted to any media outlet; including statements about the guilt or innocence of any suspect or arrestee, or comments concerning pending prosecutions, or information relating to an emergency medical incident. This includes the prohibiting of posting and/or transmitting of photographs or videos related to departmental training, activities, or work-related assignments without express written permission or a direct request from the department head or designated spokesperson.

Contact generated from unknown bloggers or other editors of social media sites or digital news sites should be directed immediately to the department head that will evaluate the media outlet and determine an appropriate response.

The county's official social media sites are all managed and coordinated by the Hertford County Webmaster unless specific departmental pages are subsequently approved by the county manager. All requests for posting content will be coordinated through the Hertford County Webmaster.

The County Manager has the authority to terminate departmental websites, social media accounts and other social media pages.

Existing Official Sites

The official website URL of Hertford County is www.hertfordcountync.gov.

The official facebook page URL for Hertford County is https://www.facebook.com/hertfordcountync/. Departments are encouraged to contribute content to the existing authorized website and facebook site in lieu of or in addition to their own departmental sites.

Requesting New Sites
Individual departmental social media sites that are official sites of the county are strictly prohibited unless explicitly allowed by the county manager. If a need for an individual media site should arise, department heads should make contact with the Hertford County Manager to discuss the need for the creation of a county site(s) such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace, Blogs, etc. The department head must provide a business case for the need and for a social networking application. If approved, all pages should be set up as the organization's page, not as an individual. The Hertford County Webmaster will be notified of the creation of any social networking site for the inclusion into the county website.

County Communications

Proactive media contact is sometimes initiated as a means of notifying the public of important information or upcoming events. This may be through news releases, media advisories, news briefings, news conferences, personal contacts with reporters, etc. Department Heads will be responsible for scheduling media events and/or submission of media releases/advisories.

County Spokespersons

Inquiries from media outlets are given a high priority by Hertford County and should be responded to as quickly and efficiently as possible. Every effort should be made to meet media deadlines and to ensure that all information released is accurate. For county wide inquiries, the spokesperson will most often be the designated Public Information Officer (PIO) for Hertford County. For department-related (routine) issues, the spokesperson will most often be the respective department head with the exception of the Sheriff's Office. The PIO will be the spokesperson for all sensitive or controversial issues relating to Hertford County and its respective departments.

Unless otherwise authorized, the County's spokespersons are:

- County Manager
- Assistant County Manager
- Designated Public Information Officer
- Sheriff, Emergency Management Coordinator, Emergency Medical Director
- Chairman of the Board of Commissioners
- Members of the Board of Commissioners
- Department Heads (routine issues). *(Exceptions regarding departmental spokespersons may be made at the discretion of the Department Head.)*

Calls or Visits from the Media should always be referred immediately to the Department Head. The Department Head will determine if the information requested is routine or non-routine and necessitates collaboration with the County PIO.

Election Issues – Inquiries regarding election and campaign issues should be referred to the Board of Elections Director. The Board of Elections Director will contact the PIO as appropriate.

Public Safety Issues/ Emergencies

During a major emergency (i.e. severe weather, chemical spill, large fire, etc.), the procedure for handling the media is highlighted in the County's Emergency Operations Plan. The plan designates the County's Public Information Officer as the main point of contact for the media. Because the Sheriff, Emergency Medical Services and Emergency Management departments operate 24/7 and their work generates a high volume of media calls, those departments should have designated personnel as media spokespersons for routine public safety issues and follow their specific guidelines when releasing information.

Posting Guidelines

Social media content is fleeting because updates compete for attention in personal social media news streams. Official county social media content needs to be clear, precise, and follow industry best practices for posting updates. Social media publishers must follow these guidelines in the types of media they share.

- **Relevant:** Information that helps citizens and pertains to their daily lives
- **Timely:** Information about deadlines, upcoming events, news or related to current events
- **Actionable:** Information to register, attend, go or do

Comments

All social media pages shall clearly indicate that posted comments will be monitored and that the department reserves the right to restrict or remove:

- Profane, obscene or pornographic language or content or links to such language or content;
- Solicitation of commerce, including but not limited to advertising of any business or product or sale;
- Comments in support of, or in opposition to, any political campaigns or ballot measures;
- Conduct or encouragement of illegal activity;
- Defamatory or personal attacks;
- Threats to any person or organization;
- Conduct that violates any federal, state or local law;
- Content that promotes, fosters, or perpetuates discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, age, national origin or ancestry, physical or mental disability, veteran status, parentage, marital status, medical condition, sexual identity, sexual orientation as well as any other category protected by federal, state or local laws.
- Comments on topics or issues not within the jurisdictional purview of Hertford County.

If comments are positive or negative and in context to the topic at hand, the content should be allowed to remain, regardless of whether it is favorable or unfavorable to Hertford County and/or its respective departments. Like e-mail, communication via agency-related social networking sites is a public record. This means that both the posts of the site administrator and any feedback by other employees or non-employees, including citizens, will become part of the public record. Because others might not be aware of the public records law, agencies should include the following statement (or some version of it) somewhere on the social networking site: "Representatives of Hertford County Government communicates via this web site". Consequently, any communication via this site (whether by a county employee or the general public) may be subject to monitoring and disclosure to third parties."

RECORDS MANAGEMENT AND PRESERVATON

In the spirit of transparency in county government, account administrators who receive messages through the private message service offered by the social media site should direct the user to contact them at a public e-mail address maintained by their department. Alternatively, account administrators could reply to the inquiry using their county e-mail account. Agencies could set all privacy settings to moderate. Again, comments expressing an opposing view point must be allowed. Departments should only remove comments that are spam or comments that would not be acceptable in a public forum such as a commissioner's public hearing. All comments or posts made to county department account walls or pages are public, not private, and are considered a public record under NCGS 132 and will be managed as such. Refer to Web Site Guidelines policies on North Carolina Government Records Web site. (http://www.records.ncdcr.gov/erecords/default.htm).

PERSONAL USE OF MEDIA DURING WORKING HOURS

Broadcast/Print Media

Letters to the Editor may not be prepared on county time, printed on county letterhead, mailed at county expense or emailed from a county email address. Telephone contact must not be made on county time using county telephones. Use of county facilities, computers or supplies is prohibited.

Personal responses or letters to the media shall not include the employee's official title or imply that comments are made on behalf of Hertford County government. You should include a sentence stating that you are speaking as a private citizen. Similar disclaimers must be given if an employee addresses a public meeting, participates in a radio talk show, or is interviewed for a radio or television program unless the employee is officially representing the County.

Social Media

Use of social media for any personal reason is strictly forbidden on county time. As a citizen, as well as an employee, you can use social media in all the same ways as anyone else outside of work hours. It is important to recognize, however, that what you publish on the Internet may reflect on your employer, Hertford County. Employees who use social media for personal purposes should be mindful of the Hertford County Personnel Policy: Section9: IV.10 "Conditions of Employment and Prohibited Acts". Therefore, while Hertford County employees are free to express themselves as private citizens on social media sites; it should not impair working relationships, impede the performance of duties, impair discipline and harmony among coworkers, or negatively affect the public perception of Hertford County or the employee's respective department.

When using social media, department personnel should be mindful that their speech becomes part of the worldwide electronic domain 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 reckless or irresponsible.
- Employees who use social media for personal purposes should:
    1. Use a disclaimer anywhere there may be uncertainty about the capacity in which they are acting. A disclaimer, such as: "The postings on this site are my own and do not represent the views or opinions of my employer" can help protect you;
    2. Recognize that anything posted on the Internet is there for good. Even if you attempt to delete the post, photo, comment, etc., it is likely that it has been stored in any number of other places. Content posted to the Internet should be thought of as permanent;
    3. Avoid sharing government material in a personal space. Try and keep your personal online presence and your work online presence separate;
    4. Respect copyright and fair use;
    5. Recognize that if you publish inappropriate comments that reflect badly on your employer in your personal space, on your personal time, that disciplinary action could follow;
    6. Above all use common sense.

For Individuals who hold senior positions, or who work in politically sensitive areas, a disclaimer does not by itself exempt them from special responsibility when posting online. By virtue of their position, these individuals should consider whether personal thoughts they publish may be misunderstood as expressing the positions or opinions of Hertford County. For individuals in positions like this, caution is especially advisable.

SECURITY GUIDELINES

From a security standpoint, social media users should be mindful of how to best prevent fraud or unauthorized access to either social media sites or the county network. In almost every case where an attacker accesses a system without authorization, they do so with the intent to cause harm. The harm intended may be mild, such as: making unofficial posts, tweets or messages—possibly of an embarrassing nature—that will be seen by the public as official messages, using the compromised site to spread malware, or encouraging users to either click links or download unwanted applications that the attacker has added to the site.

In some cases, the intended harm may be more serious. For instance, attackers could access the network and obtain information that could be used to compromise or disable the county system and/or county employees' information. In this scenario, attackers could acquire information such as:

- confidential information about county employees,
- sensitive security information,
- data about public safety plans,
- etc.

In general, users should show caution when interacting with external entities, those both known and unknown to the user. If at all in doubt of the legitimacy of any information sent to you, **please avoid linking to external sites.**

In order to prevent potential harm, users of social networking sites should minimize the amount of information an attacker is likely to gain from a successful attack. For example, individual user IDs and passwords should not be duplicated across multiple sites. In this way, if one site is compromised, the attacker cannot also gain access to other sites for which the user is authorized. For added security the following guidelines should be adhered to:

- Employ strong passwords which cannot be easily compromised.
- Periodically change passwords to Social Media accounts.
- Refrain from adding, installing, attaching or linking to any additional external services or applications that may potentially grant or enable access to the content, information or posts within the Social Media account.
- Use caution when accessing links received from External Entities.
- Exercise caution when utilizing shortened links (links that have been shortened for ease of relaying the original link), as these may lead to a malicious site. Avoid clicking on shortened links. Consider requesting the link be re-sent in another form.
- Be watchful for spoofed emails and/or website (seemingly official-looking communications that lead the user to a malicious website or attempt to solicit the user's personal or financial information). Consult the IT Director regarding any security related matter.

POLICY VIOLATIONS

Hertford County reserves the right to restrict or remove any content that is deemed to be in violation of this communications policy or any applicable law. Hertford County reserves the right to deny access to any Hertford County department to any social media site for any individual who violates the Hertford County External Communications Policy, at any time and, without prior notice.

Any employee becoming aware of, or having knowledge of, a posting/transmission or of any website or social networking page in violation of the provision of this policy shall notify his or her supervisor immediately for follow-up action.

Violation of the standards of this External Communications Policy may result in disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal, as determined by the Hertford County Manager in accordance with the Hertford County's Personnel Policy.