

Social Media Guidelines

Although social networking and blogging websites have become more popular and mainstream, and the IAFF and many affiliates have developed such sites, there are significant risks associated with using these sites.

Unless special protections are put in place, information that is posted on the Internet is available for anyone to see. Even information that is deleted from a website may still be accessible. Therefore, be cautious when posting information to any social media site.

Although the employer generally should not expect to be able to control employees' use of social media during their free time, employees should still be aware that there may be repercussions for the information that they post while off-duty. Moreover, courts have been unwilling to find that employees have a reasonable expectation of privacy with regard to information that an employee voluntarily posts online.

These guidelines are meant for IAFF affiliates who want to deliver an effective message using social media to reach elected officials, the public and the media in their communities.

This guide will also help IAFF locals understand what is acceptable to post on social media on behalf of their local, and personally.

Questions? Contact pr@iaff.org

The IAFF has published, "[The Law and the Internet for IAFF Affiliates](#)," that covers online voting for elections, website use and more.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can a public employer require its employees to provide their personal email, Facebook, Twitter or other social media passwords, or access these accounts without the permission of the employee?

The answer appears to be no; however, this issue has not been litigated. Nevertheless, while some courts have ruled that employers are able to monitor and search personal email accounts sent using an employer-provided computer, employees generally have a reasonable expectation of privacy while sending emails through their private, password-protected email account.

Does a public employer have the right to access information contained on an employee's personal cell phone, laptop or tablet?

When employees use their own personal items — such as a cell phone or laptop — at work, they tend to have a more heightened expectation of privacy. The Supreme Court has stated that ownership over an item is a factor to consider when determining whether one's Fourth Amendment rights have been violated. However, if the employee uses his or her own device, but gains access through the employer's Internet, the employer will be able to access the information that is in storage in the same way that it can when the employee uses the employer's computer.

IAFF affiliates are using social media more than ever and are asking questions about how to use it to help get their message out. Below are some specific things you can do when using social media.

Tips for IAFF Affiliates on Social Media

- Devise a social media plan for your IAFF local and implement it. Ask yourself the following: What message do you want to convey about fire fighters and paramedics to your community? Who do you want to connect with on your social media sites? What do you want to say?
- Determine what goals you want to achieve by using social media.
- Determine who will be responsible for your social media outreach.
- Determine how your social media goals will relate back to your affiliate's overall strategic plans.
- What do you want your social media outreach to look like?
- Be accurate and honest with everything you post online.
- Don't post anything based on emotion or when feeling politically attacked. Stop and make sure that the message you post is consistent with the one set forth by the leaders of your local.
- Take responsibility for what you post online. Don't publish hearsay, innuendos or confidential information that pertains to the union, fire department, media or elected officials.
- Give proper credit for copyrighted images and other intellectual property you use on social networks.
- Avoid posting abusive, insubordinate, incendiary or disloyal remarks or images that pertain to elected leaders, fire departments, the media or about other fire fighters online.
- Always remember to use your best judgment when posting something online because even if you delete information — it can still "cache" (be saved) on your computer. If you're unsure about posting something — listen to the warning bells. Seek the guidance of IAFF leaders in your local, state and even your district vice president, if necessary.
- Remember to use hashtags because they are good way to promote and educate the public about your events.

Personal Use of Social Media

- Be mindful where you use social media and what you say. Many fire departments are cracking down on fire fighters' use of social media in the fire stations. Be aware of any rules that may pertain to using social media while on duty.
- Do not speak on behalf of your local or act like an authority figure on social media — especially when breaking news happens. Remember, your local president or appointed affiliate spokesperson should lead messaging. Leave official fire department messaging to your fire chief or PIO.
- Be careful of the sources you use to share information on social media. Beware of the websites and sources that spread misleading and unreliable information.
- Be mindful of posting/tagging photos that are embarrassing. Likewise, for the use of hashtags. Use hashtags responsibly.
- Be mindful of making very personal or potential embarrassing confessionals on social media.
- Avoid social media use while impaired and refrain from promoting alcohol, drug use or lewd activity.