

Recognizing the Best in County Government Programs!



2014 Achievement Awards



2014 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 2, 2014

Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2014.**

Program Information

Locality Prince William County Police Department

Program Title Public Information Office

Program Category Communications

Contact Information

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Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name Stephan M. Hudson

Title Chief of Police

Signature 

Call for Entries

2014 VACo Achievement Award
Prince William County Police Department – Public Information Office
Nomination Narrative

In recent years there has been a decline in traditional news media operations. Local newspapers have had to close their offices, electronic media has required their reporters to multi-task; they are serving as reporters and photographers. Some print media companies survive by blogging and using social media. This initially was a concern for the police department. Our challenge was to fill the void left by the traditional news media and tell our own story.

Then we realized it may not be such a big problem after all. If we utilized social media platforms, we could be our own newsroom. We could tell our own story without the filter of the news media. No longer do we have to beg the media to cover feel good stories or 'fluff' stories that might not interest them. We are able to post whatever information we want to, including photos and accomplish the objective ourselves. The public can reply, comment, opine and ask questions directly of us.

In January of 2012, due to the explosion of social media, First Sergeant Chinn, in charge of the Public Information Office, requested an additional position be created in PIO to specifically post, monitor and mine the social media accounts for the police department. This was in an effort to address the fast-changing landscape of the Internet and the way citizens communicate and obtain information online. The first sergeant's suggestion offered an innovative way to engage in conversation with citizens and promote cooperation with fellow local, state and federal agencies. The police department senior staff met and discussed the need for the position. They decided to place a seasoned civilian whose background was in Intelligence and Communications into the position for one year and then re-evaluate the overall need. The social media liaison was assigned full-time in April, 2012. In 2013, the overall need was clear, social media is here to stay and demands our full attention for public relations, investigations and communications.

Two years have passed and the following are the results of the Social Media Team which consist of the PIO first sergeant, a sworn police officer, a civilian public information specialist and the social media liaison. The Department increased its activity with three major social media sources; Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The focus was placed on Facebook because it reports having more than one billion users. The facebook page was linked directly to the department's twitter and YouTube accounts. All posts are simultaneously posted to Facebook and twitter; therefore citizens can use one or both sources to retrieve information. YouTube contains surveillance videos and public service announcements. Users can enter Twitter and YouTube immediately by tapping the icons on the facebook page or through our website. Many of our social media posts will contain a direct link to our website. This enables the consumer to retrieve more detailed information. The website also maintains a library of documents citizens can search and find answers to their law enforcement questions.

We currently have over 25,000 Facebook fans, making us sixth in the nation for law enforcement agencies similar in size and first in Virginia for any size department with the exception of Virginia State Police. Why are our numbers so much higher than other neighboring jurisdictions? We believe it's largely because citizens have the ability to have a free-flowing conversation with us about a variety of topics. They are able to review and post privately or publicly on the facebook page. Our typical response to their comments or messages is within minutes. It is clear this allows them to feel a closer connection to us. An average month for us consists of about 3,000 citizen comments and posts, 300 direct citizen messages, over 80,000 citizens "engaged" with our post and we "reach" more than 500,000 citizens.

We gather, write, edit, and post constantly to the Department's social media pages. We consistently post routine incidents such as the daily activity report, fugitive of the week, cold cases, dangerous drugs, concert traffic updates, and weather advisories. We post priority events such as in-progress crimes like armed robberies, missing children, endangered missing adults, evacuations, traffic crashes, storms, and school lockdowns. We post special events such as awards, citizen police academy sessions and law enforcement fundraisers. We also review other social media pages from fellow police/fire agencies and news media for related information and share the posts that would interest or affect our followers.

The social media liaison mines social media for intelligence purposes for preventative measures such as: Flash Mobs, Occupy events, scams, and large parties. She also looks for crimes that have occurred or just occurred that are being posted such as: fights, shootings, and large gatherings. Many "on-lookers" will tweet about in-progress crimes on twitter or similar sites. This information is relayed to the Watch Commanders and disseminated to patrol officers. We have also found information that concerns other jurisdictions and are able to forward the information. Social media knows no boundaries.

As a result of our success with social media we have been fairly active in helping others.

- The social media staff has been asked to present their program to several groups during the last year. These groups include FBI National Academy in Quantico, IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police), GAS (Godwin Area Security Group), Citizen's Police Academy, and Public Safety Communications.
- Other law enforcement and county agencies have requested information and/or assistance with developing their social media programs, such as: Fauquier Sheriff's Office, VA Tech Police, PWC Sheriff's Office and Prince William County Employees Credit Union and NYPD Transit Authority.
- Blogs have been written for the IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police) and for the PD Roll Call newsletter. We also participated in a global tweet-a-thons.

The following are significant posts during the years 2013 and 2014. (An additional attachment shows screen shots of each example.)

- **January 2013 Line of Duty Death.** Citizens show an overwhelming outpouring of support to our department through thousands of posts, comments and messages related to the loss of Officer Chris Yung.
- **June 2013 Citizen Posts her beagle is lost on our page.** We checked the Animal Shelter page and another citizen posted they had found a beagle in that same area. Information was given to the owner, they made contact and were reunited with their dog.
- **June 2013 Found jewelry located in the possession of burglary suspects is posted on social media.** Citizens call in and identify many of the pieces. Most notable was the identification of a Scottish rite 14th degree ring. The citizen (through a private post) explained what type of ring it was and who to contact to obtain the owners name. Once contact was made with the organization, a detective determined who the owner was. Upon contacting the owner it was discovered the ring originally belonged to his father and was passed down to him. The sentimental significance of the ring was invaluable. The citizen who originally relayed this information insisted on not being recognized and stated knowing the owner had the ring back in his possession was satisfying enough.
- **June 2013 "Seven" the dog is rescued from an owner who abused him in police presence.**
Officers brought him into the station and he was quickly adopted by one of the squad members. Citizens followed the story on Facebook worldwide. Fans posted comments from Germany, Italy, Denmark and others to say they are happy they were that Seven is safe. The story went viral with more than 50,000 hits on just one shared post. InsideNova online newspaper later ranked it as the #1 story of 2013.
- **July 2013 Citizen relays information on a wanted subject and drug distributor**
In July, a citizen sent a private message telling us the location of a wanted drug dealer. Because the suspect was hiding in a different county with his girlfriend, Virginia State Police Drug Enforcement was notified. VSP conducted surveillance for several days and eventually arrested him.
- **Nov/Dec 2013 A request is made over social media for citizens to join us in two projects**
One, a winter coat drive seeking new or used coat to less fortunate adults and children in PWC through the Headstart program. More than 155 coats were collected and donated to the cause. Two, Untrim- A -Tree seeking toys for needy children. Hundreds of toys were collected with one family donating an entire truckload.

- **Jan 2014 We shared a found dog post**

Within 30 minutes of us sharing a found dog, a citizen gave the name of her neighbor who lost his dog. The neighbor happened to be the uncle of the social media liaison. She called her uncle and told him that his dog had been found. He was reunited with his dog in record time.

- **Feb 2014 A suspect wanted for murder bails from vehicle pursuit into a residential area**

Citizens are immediately advised of situation and severity via social and traditional news media. More than 1,000 people share our FB reaching another 100,000 people. We continually update the posts throughout the course of the incident. After a long and exhausting search, the suspect is found hiding in a homeowner's basement.

- **March 2014 Suicidal Subject**

A resident began sending Facebook messages to us in early March. They were somewhat random and he appeared to be mentally unstable but nothing that warranted the use of police databases. We replied to most of his messages asking if he needed police assistance or recommending he contact social services. On March 16th, he indicated he did not want to live anymore and felt like overdosing on his medication. We engaged him in conversation and requested his address. He refused. He then said he felt like jumping off the 123 bridge. Using LInX we compared his Facebook profile photo to the LInX mug shot photos to confirm his identity. We also were able to review his history which reflected he was mentally unstable and involved in past criminal activity. His address and photo in LInX were confirmed with other police databases and open sources. All information was forwarded to the communications supervisor and patrol officers were dispatched to his residence. We were still conversing with him on Facebook when officers knocked on his door. He was taken into custody and transported to the hospital for evaluation. He was released from a mental facility a week later. On the 26th he posted he was doing better and not as paranoid after spending time in the hospital and receiving medication. He stated he was 50% better and working toward 100%. He continues to post on our page. He is still confused and anxious but at least he feels like he has someone to talk with. He uses social media to communicate whether he needs help or just to chat with a virtual friend.

- **Winter Storms 2014**

We realize that we need to be available to citizens no matter what the emergency. This past winter was a difficult one for many. The snowstorms left many without power or means of transportation. We were able to provide physical and emotional responses through social media. While phone lines were down, citizens were able to post on the department Facebook requesting assistance. For some, it was merely the comfort of knowing they had a connection to public safety if they needed us. We also posted shelters, convenience stores and restaurants that were open and available to the public.

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RE: PWCPD Public Information Office Nomination Narrative

We were able to update power company information and road closures and openings. The positive response to our posts was overwhelming.

Why did we make the full-time commitment to social media? First, we are able to decide what we want to report. Since newspapers are disappearing we needed to fill the gap. People with smart phones and tablets expect access to instant information. Secondly, the citizens feel more connected to us and we feel more connected to them. We have made some great strides in closing the gap between the citizens and the police. Thirdly, recruiting is more broad and cost effective on social media. We are able to showcase our department along with all the bells and whistles that applicants might find attractive. Lastly, intelligence is a must. Follow those who follow you.