

**Testimony of Hassan Aden  
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Before the Task Force on 21st Century Policing  
Listening Session: Social Media  
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Commissioner Ramsey, Professor Robinson, Director Davis and members of the Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing, thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Hassan Aden and I am the former Chief of Police for the Greenville, North Carolina, Police Department and the Director of Research and Programs at the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). I have over 27 years of law enforcement experience, and I am here today to testify on behalf of the IACP.

The IACP is the world's largest association of law enforcement executives, with more than 22,000 members in 98 different countries. For over 120 years, the IACP has been launching internationally acclaimed programs, speaking out on behalf of law enforcement, conducting ground-breaking research, and providing exemplary programs and services to the law enforcement profession across the globe. One of those programs is the IACP Center for Social Media which builds the capacity of law enforcement to use social media to prevent and solve crimes, strengthen police-community relations, and enhance services.

Law enforcement agencies of all sizes across the United States are using many forms of social media in innovative and effective ways. According to the fifth annual Center for Social Media Survey completed in late 2014, 95 percent of law enforcement agencies surveyed stated they were using some form of social media. Of those using social media, 78.8 percent indicated social media had helped to solve a crime in their jurisdiction and 77.5 percent stated that social media had improved police-community relations in their jurisdiction.<sup>i</sup>

Social media allows law enforcement agencies to reach a broad, diverse audience, quickly, and in an unfiltered manner. These platforms also allow police to reach out in conversational ways to open lines of communication and show examples that break down stereotypes. By using these tools thoughtfully, agencies develop new levels of transparency and provide exceptional customer service, thereby enhancing relationships with individuals, businesses, and organizations throughout their community, not just online, but offline as well.

I attended a Center for Social Media training just six months before I became chief in Greenville and that training gave me the tools I needed to be successful. By sharing best practices and a national perspective, the IACP has provided vital information to myself and other leaders.

### **Building Relationships**

It is vital that agencies craft a social media strategy and develop their social media presence sooner than later. During or immediately following a crisis situation is not the time to begin using social media. One starting point can be with the traditional news media in their area.

When I went to Greenville Police Department (GPD), I found a place where morale was low, the crime rate was unacceptable, and relationships with some elected officials, the news media, and community members were in need of repair. On day one, I met with the local news outlets and established an expectation of inclusion and transparency. I later created a deliberate media plan

that included a new media relations position, filled by a local news anchor that came to the department and provided a new, positive perspective.

In my first year at GPD we enhanced our Facebook presence, adding 4,000 new followers, and also established new Instagram and Twitter accounts to connect with the public. We used informative messaging, listening to what the community wanted from us and building transparency. We established Twitter Town Halls, where officers from various units shared pictures and answered questions about their role in the department and community. We also did Tweet-alongs where we shared updates, photos, and videos throughout an officer's shift, providing a virtual ride-along experience. Using social media, we were able to create opportunities for people to interact with us in a way the public almost never gets.

One example of how GPD utilized their social presence was during an unseasonably cold winter. We sent messages across social media platforms telling people that if they see a homeless person out in the bad weather to please call GPD as we had a block of rooms at a local hotel (paid for by Angel Cops, a local nonprofit). If individuals chose not to go, officers carry wool blankets that they can provide. This message of community caretaking spoke volumes to the residents of Greenville.

We consistently received great responses to our social media efforts. When I left two years later, there was a 13 percent reduction in violent crime and a 5 percent reduction in property crime. Department morale was at an all-time high. And, we had repaired, improved, and built new relationships with all local stakeholders. Much of this can be attributed to the open lines of communication we created and the transparency we facilitated, often using social media tools.

The goals of a law enforcement agency (particularly the public information office) and the media are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are the same: to provide the public with accurate reporting of events that impact their lives. By working together, police and media outlets are able to benefit the community with comprehensive, timely reporting. This type of relationship shows that the agencies have nothing to hide and are a true partner, tightly integrated with those they serve.

Establishing this relationship early and nurturing it continuously sets an agency up for success. Social media messages can then be shared and amplified using the followers of both the agency and the media outlet. This will allow the proper message to get to a broader audience. Media can pick up and expand on stories released through social channels by the agency, while also giving the agency a chance to provide an unfiltered, timely account.

Social media allows agencies to reach beyond geographic, cultural, demographic, and other boundaries that exist throughout the country. Social channels can be a vital tool in starting the conversation on many topics and can help foster and build new relationships with community members and groups. Boise, Idaho, Police Department (BPD) is an example of how an agency has used social media to cross a divide in their community.

In 2011, BPD received information that at least one possible hate-bias crime had occurred in the downtown area and was not reported. The department's liaison to the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community worked with other officers to develop a flyer explaining what a hate-bias crime is and urging citizens to report them. The flyer was distributed and an electronic link to the flyer was posted on the BPD Facebook page along with a short statement on department concerns about unreported crimes. BPD then shared the link on other Facebook pages including the Idaho Humanities Council, the Ada County Human Rights Task Force, and The Community Center, a local facility devoted to the LGBT and allied population.

This was one of the agency's first efforts to create an improved dialogue and open new lines of communication to a specific segment of their community. BPD received positive, thankful responses. Even those who gave the Facebook posts a passing glance still saw it, and it registered that their police department took the time and effort to reach out to them specifically and that the department cares about their safety.

### **Brand Identity**

Social media has brought a new perspective to many agencies, and that is that both the law enforcement profession as well as their department are a brand. Just like the large profitable companies that we can identify through a brief commercial or a glimpse of their logo, police departments have their own unique brand.

When an individual comes across an agency patch, badge, or logo, they will get certain feelings and have certain expectations. If those images are paired with consistent messaging that portrays honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness, then those values will become part of that law enforcement agency brand. This should also be partnered with exceptional customer service. Social media has changed expectations, and many people now turn to these channels to voice a complaint or ask a question. Agencies can, and many are, there to respond in those instances. This shows the community that we are listening and we care.

Austin, Texas, Police Department (APD) is one agency that has worked hard to build their brand. They listened to their community across various social media platforms and were able to understand what was important to their residents and what needs APD could meet using social media.

Like many agencies, APD uses consistent imaging across their web and social media accounts, so they are easily identifiable to the public. Through these platforms, APD engages in conversations and shares information about the things they have identified as important or concerning to citizens. For example, through thoughtful listening, they found out that when the APD helicopter was seen, many residents grew apprehensive and wanted to know what was going on in their city. So, APD now takes a proactive approach by tweeting information each time the helicopter goes up and their citizens thank them for it. They also send out information about the location of their public information officer during events so people know they have a point of contact and where they can find that person.

Of course, what was of interest to the citizens of Austin may be different in other communities. That is why it is vitally important for an agency's brand and messaging to be created with their community in mind. It is important to know your community, how they communicate, and what they want.

Having a strong, identifiable brand allows community members to know exactly where to go for information and also sets up expectations for what they will receive from police departments. Communities across the country are diverse in what social media tools they use and how they use them. It is important for the department to know their community's social media tendencies so they can capitalize on them and ensure they are using these tools for the best interest of the department and the community.

Another great example of the value of social media is the Utica, New York, Police Department (UPD). Initially, the Chief was very apprehensive about the use of social media for his agency. He was then invited to a social media focus group at IACP. By connecting with other law enforcement leaders and learning how to strategically approach social media he decided to give it a try. The chief had a sergeant who was very interested in social media and was in touch with the community and how residents and other local organizations were using these tools. So the sergeant was put in charge of crafting a strategy and maintaining the sites.

Today, UPD has 38,453 Facebook followers in a city of just over 60,000 residents. And, they are closing in on 100 arrests from information received from residents after seeing requests posted on Facebook. In multiple instances, people turned themselves in. In other instances, people see the pictures and videos and contact the police department with information. The biggest surprise has been the speed in which they receive the tips. Many times it is within minutes and the fastest has been around 30 seconds. Sergeant Steve Hauck says he believes social media empowers the community to get involved in the crime fighting process. Instead of the police department putting out sporadic requests for information, there is a sustained level of engagement with social media. The community knows that they can work through UPD's social channels to provide information and ensure their community is a safer place.

### **Voice and Tone**

Social media provides a forum for professional but also conversational and personal messaging for law enforcement agencies. This type of messaging can help break down stereotypes by showing the humanity of police officers and providing insight into the challenges law enforcement officers face and how they operate. These opportunities make law enforcement officers more approachable which in turns allows for more two-way communication between the agency and other community members.

Many agencies have embraced a particular tone and voice for their social media channels. For example, many have all seen the officer singing along to Taylor Swift, and lighthearted stories and images can be found on many agency social media pages. Bringing tasteful humor and

relaxed conversations to the community is completely appropriate on these channels and can open new lines of communication and show a new side to police. Technical and legal jargon is tossed aside and police are able to speak directly to the public in a way they can all understand.

To produce the best and most useful resources, IACP works with local law enforcement agencies and brings in visiting fellows who provide valuable insight and help guide projects and programs. This past year, Lieutenant Zachary Perron, from the Palo Alto, California, Police Department (PAPD) joined the IACP team as a fellow. PAPD has been using social media for years, and has established their brand identity and built relationships throughout their community using social media tools.

In November 2014, a group of activists gathered in Palo Alto to protest the police actions that had occurred in New York City and Ferguson. The protestors took over the downtown area, and PAPD set up their Emergency Operations Center and began implementing their communications plan, which included a strong social media component. PAPD started the day with a tweet to all their followers that included the hashtag being used by the demonstrators. They indicated that the protest was happening and that they looked forward to working with the protestors for a peaceful demonstration. PAPD continued to send out information throughout the day, providing information to those that were impacted by the demonstration as well as to the protestors themselves. As the events stayed nonviolent, PAPD repeatedly used the word “peaceful” throughout the day to describe the event and the participants.

As the day went on, groups involved in the protests, including Stanford University’s Black Student Union engaged with the police department, retweeting some of the department’s messaging and including PAPD in their own tweets. Protestors thanked PAPD for their professional response and noted their appreciation for the terminology they used throughout the day. This strategy of using strong, positive messaging; communicating early and often; and engaging participants has been successfully replicated in subsequent events.

### **Crisis Communication**

Unfortunately, our agencies and the communities they serve are still going to have to deal with crisis situations. Whether it is a natural disaster, a missing person, or a school shooting, it is imperative that the lines of communication stay open. Agencies should not miss an opportunity to show their communities that they are present and working hard to protect and serve all individuals. Social media is just one more way that agencies can keep their presence known and constantly share information and the status of any situation of compelling public interest.

Again, thank you for convening this listening session and for the opportunity for the International Association of Chiefs of Police to express its views on the state of community-police relations in the United States and offer suggestions on how law enforcement can utilize social media tools. I welcome any questions from Task Force members.

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<sup>i</sup> 2014 IACP Center for Social Media Annual Survey.

<http://www.iacpsocialmedia.org/Resources/Publications/2014SurveyResults.aspx>