

## 14-10

### STATEMENT OF POLICY

#### Social Media for Emergency and Risk Communications

##### Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) recommends the use and maintenance of professional social media accounts by local health departments to share regular health messages and public health emergency and risk communications. By routinely engaging with audiences on social media in non-emergency periods, local health departments can become a trusted source of information and services for communities and the media. Local health departments should use social media to provide situational awareness during emergencies, address mis- and disinformation and rumors, and educate about the role of public health.<sup>1</sup>

NACCHO encourages local health departments to allocate staff and expend resources on developing internal social media capabilities and capacity, in accordance with NACCHO's Risk Communications Capacity Policy Statement. NACCHO recommends local, state, and federal funding be made available to establish and sustain communications capacity to support these endeavors.

NACCHO acknowledges that some local health departments do not have the resources to engage in such activities. Likewise, internet access in rural areas can be limited, as 22.3% of Americans in rural areas and 27.7% of Americans in Tribal lands lack coverage from fixed terrestrial 25/3 Mbps broadband, as compared to only 1.5% of Americans in urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Local health departments should establish contingencies outside of internet communications to ensure messages reach outlying communities.

With the proper resources, NACCHO recommends that local health departments do the following:

- **Build in-house capacity.** Local health department management should provide training and resources to local health department communications professionals as well as staff who may support these activities, so they can effectively and appropriately use digital communications tools. With this knowledge, local health departments can build in-house capacity for using social media and integrating it into emergency risk communications plans. Designated staff should be granted sufficient time and resources for monitoring accounts, posting frequently, responding to audience comments, and monitoring analytics on reach and engagement. In jurisdictions where communications are centralized, the in-house capacity may be at the county level rather than the department level.
- **Establish an online presence.** Social media platforms are highly accessible and visible to the public. When establishing a social media presence, local health departments should consider how best to reach their audiences, including non-English speakers and people



with functional and access needs to ensure that the public can easily search for and find the health department's social media accounts on appropriate platforms. Local health departments should also adhere to industry best practices.<sup>3</sup>

- **Ensure compliance with federal laws.** While local and state laws may also be applicable to social media, a better understanding of the potential impact of federal laws will help local health departments navigate the legal landscape. Appropriate federal agencies and local legal counsel should clarify for local health departments how and when laws such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and first amendment considerations apply to social media use. Also consider that federal ADA accessibility rules apply to social media posts.<sup>4</sup> Federal guidance should include legal resources that assist local health departments in navigating compliance.<sup>5</sup>
- **Use partnerships to amplify reach.** Local health departments, especially those with limited resources for social media, should work with partners (e.g., Virtual Operations Support Teams, Medical Reserve Corps units, community health coalitions) to cross-promote social media campaigns and share best practices. Health departments can also leverage partners to research and develop ways to use social media for more than communication purposes, including public health emergency early alert systems.
- **Don't just speak – listen.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) Capabilities, local health departments should use social media not just for messaging, but also for listening to incoming concerns and requests from the public.<sup>6</sup> In order to ensure this capability can be met, sufficient funding to local health departments through PHEP should be made available to allow support for the public information function.
- **Prepare messaging ahead of emergencies.** Local health department communications professionals should prepare tailored emergency messaging in advance and collaborate with trusted partners and/or other health departments to share messaging. Local health departments should also consider setting aside funds to support paid social media advertising to quickly reach local audiences during emergencies. Social media algorithms prioritize paid posts; paying for posts increases the likelihood of local health department messages being seen and allows for outreach to specific audiences based on geography, demographics, and interests.<sup>3</sup>

### **Justification**

In 2024, more than half (54%) of Americans reported getting at least some of their news from social media.<sup>7</sup> Social media has been shown to influence health-related behaviors, and it offers a powerful tool to rapidly reach large segments of the population with tailored health messaging.<sup>8</sup> NACCHO's 2022 National Profile of Local Health Departments (Profile) study found that 88% of local health departments use Facebook, 43% use other social media (YouTube, Instagram, Next Door), 14% use LinkedIn, and 34% use X (formerly known as Twitter). This is compared to use in 2019 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic) when 84% used Facebook, 27% used other social media, 8% used LinkedIn, and 28% used X.<sup>9</sup> Reasons for this uneven adoption rate range from a lack of resources (e.g., time, expertise) to prohibitive internal policies on social media use in the workplace. Rationale aside, local health departments that do not use social media are missing an opportunity to connect with audiences.

A large majority of U.S. adults (86%) say they at least sometimes get news via a smartphone, computer, or tablet, including 57% who say they do so often; social media platforms make it easy to get news in this way. The people who regularly get news on different social media sites often differ by gender, age, political party and other factors, so local health departments need to know their local demographics and choose platforms accordingly. Social media users also can easily share what they see.<sup>10</sup> The “shareability” of social media can exponentially increase the size of the audience receiving emergency and risk communication messages, as well as the speed at which they receive these messages. This shareability also necessitates ongoing social media listening to identify potential issues that could arise and require attention.

During times of non-emergency, social media is an important means of communicating with the public and traditional media, monitoring mis- and disinformation, gauging public concerns, and gathering on-the-ground, situational information. Local health departments can also use social media to sustain relationships with news media, as reporters often comb social media for news. If the local health department’s perspective or message is available through social media channels, the media can source social media content, rather than making calls for comment.

During an emergency, the public expects response agencies to deliver information and to respond to questions via social media.<sup>3</sup> Further, rumors and mis- and disinformation travel over social media during an emergency, and local health departments should ensure that credible information from reputable sources floods the social media environment to help counteract rumors. During a crisis, if the response agencies and organizations are not engaged, the public and the media will find other sources via social media to comment on the crisis.

It is vital that local health departments be proficient in social media use before an emergency hits. Routine use of social media develops the capacity of local health department communications professionals and those who support them and builds an audience that can receive information from the earliest moments of an emergency. Speed is a key principle in effective emergency and risk communication, and social media is an excellent tool for delivering information quickly and efficiently. Local health departments should treat public health emergencies as opportunities to mass communicate vital public health information and to increase public trust.

## **References**

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### **Record of Action**

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