



# VFIS<sup>®</sup> news

Bringing important information to emergency service organizations

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We welcome comments, suggestions and questions from our readers.

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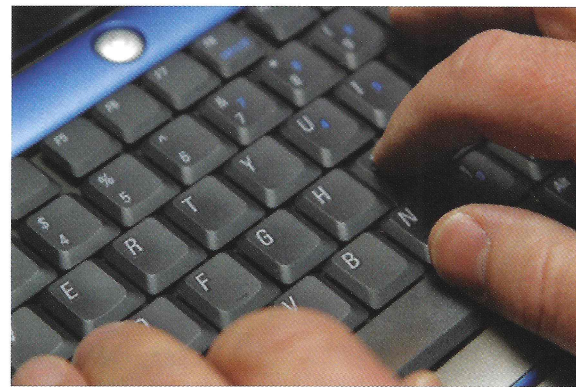
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## Develop a Policy on Electronic Communication Use

By Todd W Thompson, Sr. Vice President, Risk Control Services

*A recent article in the California Lawyer points out that “legal work is growing as bosses mingle in social media sites.” Technological and communication advancements have heightened the risk of personnel-related litigation for all organizations. The increased use and accessibility of computers, the Internet, e-mail and cell phones in the working*



*environment raises the possibility of the number of costly lawsuits facing emergency service organizations (ESOs). ESOs should be aware of—and address the hazards of—members using technology in their daily tasks. This article cannot address all of the hazards in the use of technology, but it can provide ESOs with a starting point. The best course of action is to have the ESO’s attorney work with them in developing an overall Electronic Communication Systems policy.*

ESOs rely on the professionalism and good conduct of their members. With the proliferation of electronic communication devices, the organization’s Code of Conduct should be updated to include their proper use. Setting management’s expectations for staff’s use of these devices is an important first step in raising their awareness of the issue. The organization should expect its staff to conduct their daily electronic interaction in the same manner in which they would interact personally with other members and the public—that is, with professionalism and conduct that is acceptable in the workplace and customer environment.

An Acceptable Use Policy should also be developed by the organization. The policy should state that the organization’s information technology system is specifically for business purposes and that any personal use granted to the members is a privilege that is granted to them by the ESO. The policy should outline what represents acceptable or unacceptable use. Some examples include unethical behavior; illegal activities; behavior harmful to the ESO; inappropriate language, jokes or photos; or any use that would disrupt daily work on

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## Develop a Policy on Electronic Communication Use

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the system. The members should be aware that any use of the ESO's electronic communication systems is treated as business-related information or communication. The ESO thus has the right to monitor any and all electronic communication or use and determine whether it meets the Acceptable Use Policy.

The consequences of violating the policy should also be clearly stated. The organization's progressive discipline policy should be updated to include the unacceptable use of the electronic communication system or the employees' own cell phones, etc., while working at or representing the ESO. The severity of the progressive discipline should match the severity of the unacceptable act. In some cases, then, there may be an incident where the unacceptable act is so severe that the only course of action is immediate termination of the member.

Once the Acceptable Use Policy is developed, all members should be given copies of it and acknowledge that they have read, understand, and will abide by the policy. An acknowledgment form signed by each member should be placed in his or her personnel file.

Taking these preliminary steps to educate your members on the organization's electronic communication guidelines will help to mitigate negative consequences in the future. Equally critical, understanding these policies means that members can continue the positive impact that the emergency service organization has in their community. ❁

