



United States Coast Guard  
**SOCIAL MEDIA HANDBOOK**

# FOREWORD

CAPT Matthew Moorlag  
Chief, Office of Public Affairs



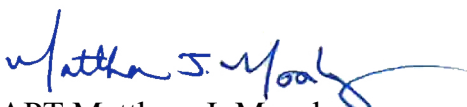
Social media is omnipresent in the world we live in. With more than 300 official accounts across the enterprise, social media is entrenched in how the Coast Guard communicates with its members, external publics, and the global maritime industry. Social media affords the Coast Guard the opportunity to build and maintain trust with each of these audiences and leverage two-way engagement to better understand and better communicate.

For Coast Guard members, civilians, and families, social media continues to be a source of information, collaboration, and entertainment. Every member of the Coast Guard also has the opportunity to be a brand ambassador—increasing public trust, understanding, and appreciation. Through your responsible and professional use of social media, you lend credibility to the values, the mission, and the legacy we all serve.

The Coast Guard Social Media Handbook supplements and expands upon policy guidance on social media use established in the External Affairs Manual.

Whether you've come to the Social Media Handbook looking for guidance on personal use, unofficial use, or official use, I hope this content is beneficial and relevant to you. If you have questions or feel there is opportunity to expand this handbook, please reach out to CG-0922's Digital Media Division.

Semper Paratus

  
CAPT Matthew J. Moorlag

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
Outlook	5
Strategy	5
Coast Guard Brand	6
Editorial Policy	6
Reporting Incidents	6
Social Media Platforms and Mediums	7
<b>Coast Guard Members</b>	<b>8</b>
Social Media Use Activity Requirements	9
Roles and Definitions	9
Personal Monetization	10
Political Activities	10
Balancing First Amendment	11
Accountability	11
<b>Commands and Public Affairs</b>	<b>13</b>
Commanders and Leaders	14
Public Affairs and PA Representatives	15
USCG Social Media Response Guide	17
Accessibility Requirements	18
Social Media Records Management	18
Copyright	18
<b>Families, Auxiliarists, Retirees</b>	<b>19</b>
Families	20
Auxiliarists	20
Retirees	21
<b>Appendix A: Establishing an Official Social Media Account</b>	<b>22</b>
Does my unit need a social media account?	23
Requesting an official social media account	23
<b>Appendix B: FAQs</b>	<b>24</b>
Frequently Asked Questions	25



# INTRODUCTION



# Outlook

From its creation, social media has quickly and unquestionably transformed the way people communicate, network, and grow. The United States Coast Guard understands the power social media has to communicate, inform, and collaborate among its members, external publics, and even in times of crisis.

As a branch of the Armed Forces, the Coast Guard is unique. The Coast Guard serves as defenders of the homeland, but also as a federal regulatory agency. As a result, the Coast Guard relies on mass communications tools to not only broadcast messages, but to seek input from the stakeholders who are subject to Coast Guard rules and policies.

The Coast Guard is headquartered in Washington, D.C., but the service is made up of hundreds of independent commands in communities across the country and, in many instances, around the world. As a result, communication efforts are localized and commanders rely on both the good will and the first-hand experience of those who call the community home to be effective partners in mission execution.

Regardless of your Coast Guard affiliation—i.e., active duty, reserve, civilian, Auxiliarist, retiree, Ombudsman, or family member—this handbook will familiarize you with Coast Guard policies, guidance, and recommendations on how to use social media effectively in your personal and professional communications.

Social media evolves with every like, share, and post. This handbook aims to provide useful information that is unlikely to change drastically within the next few years. From time-to-time the Coast Guard does release updates to social media policies. The latest resources, and a listing of official Coast Guard social media accounts, can be found by visiting [uscg.mil/socialmedia](https://uscg.mil/socialmedia).

If you have questions or suggestions related to this handbook or the Coast Guard's social media policy, contact CG-092, Office of Governmental and Public Affairs.

## Strategy

The Commandant establishes priorities and lays out a strategic plan for the U.S. Coast Guard. Communication plans are built upon the goals and objectives laid out in those documents. Across the enterprise, social media is a pivotal component of the Coast Guard's communications objectives—in terms of communicating with various audiences, networking, and professional development.

As the platforms continue to evolve, the Coast Guard will continue to leverage social media and its ability to connect, engage, and inspire by following the Coast Guard's mantra of using the “Right Tool, at the Right Level, for the Right Audience.” The Coast Guard's social media engagement and relevant policies will evolve to meet the needs of the Coast Guard and its internal and external stakeholders. To effectively utilize the network of official social media sites, units, Districts, Areas, and headquarter-level units will strive to synchronize messages, and campaigns, in order to boost the effectiveness of communication efforts across the enterprise.

# Coast Guard Brand

Every day people discuss a wide array of Coast Guard topics online, including missions, people, equipment, and policies. These engagements and conversations happen on official Coast Guard channels and on other platforms or channels as well. It is impossible for the Coast Guard's professional communicators and social media managers to be aware of every engagement or conversation. In that respect, it really does "take a village" to ensure the integrity of the Coast Guard brand. Anyone reading this is empowered to help tell the Coast Guard story and to assist in correcting incorrect information online. When the Coast Guard brand is strong it can help everyone on the team by way of increased public understanding and support, increased funding and resources, and improved recruiting and retention. Everyone in the Coast Guard family is encouraged to participate and associate with the Coast Guard brand and similarly everyone is expected to do so in a way that appropriately reflects the organization and the values it represents.

## Editorial Policy

As a public organization, the Coast Guard must balance its commitment to provide an open, transparent, and safe digital space for its members and the public while also respecting its members' and the public's right to expression in a public forum.

Each official Coast Guard platform and/or program includes a specific comment policy that serves as a road map for public affairs professionals and representatives to maintain appropriate online engagements. The comment policies stipulate any engagements—regardless of affiliation or status of contributor—must be void of messaging that is offensive or threatening to a specific person or group. Additionally, any content or engagement (posts, Tweets, comments, images, GIFs, memes, emojis) must be free from profane language, commercial spam, and blatantly off-topic content.

Violations of this comment policy can result in messages, images, videos, and memes, being removed from the account. Multiple or repeated violations from a specific person or account can result in the person or account being permanently blocked.

## Reporting Incidents









There are more than 300 official social media accounts throughout the Coast Guard—spanning multiple platforms, encompassing hundreds of thousands of followers, and garnering hundreds of online engagements each day. This calls for a collective effort from the entire Coast Guard team to ensure these official accounts remain a safe space to connect, learn, and collaborate.

Anyone who observes inappropriate social media activity on an official page or by a member of the Coast Guard is strongly encouraged to promptly report it through their chain-of-command or to USCG's Digital Media Division (CG-09221). Egregious activity may warrant notification to a more appropriate agency, such as the Coast Guard Investigative Service, Coast Guard Civil Rights, or the Coast Guard Sexual Assault Prevention, Response, and Recovery Program.

Coast Guard personnel are also encouraged to professionally and respectfully correct errors and misrepresentations made about the Coast Guard if they feel comfortable. Doing so is a positive action you can take as a Service ambassador. However, it is recommended to let public affairs and social media managers handle negative or disparaging posts as often the originators are simply looking to cause issues.

# Social Media Platforms and Mediums

The following table lists some of the most popular social media platforms and communication mediums and the authorized target level within the Coast Guard organizational structure for each platform. For a directory of official U.S. Coast Guard social media sites, visit [uscg.mil/socialmedia](https://uscg.mil/socialmedia).

	Description	Target Level
 Facebook	The largest social network, which is used to connect with people through entertainment, inspiration, and information	HQ Area District Unit
 Instagram	A social network used to connect people with immediate news and updates on a particular subject	HQ Area District Unit
 Twitter	Media sharing network used to inform and entertain people through visuals, including photo, videos, and other digital content	HQ Area District
 YouTube	Media sharing network that hosts video content and is the second-largest search engine	HQ
 LinkedIn	A social network focused on professional networking, professional development, and formal or informal recruitment	HQ
 Flickr	Media sharing network used to share and catalogue photos, videos, and other media	HQ
 Podcast(s)	A collective series of audio files hosted across various platforms that users can listen to by downloading or streaming	HQ
 Blog(s)	A regularly updated web page that contains formal or informal entries typically written in conversational tone	HQ

Requests for social media accounts outside of the target levels reflected above may require a waiver request form to be completed and routed to CG-092 for consideration. All approved accounts must be registered with CG-092 and fulfill steps necessary to become “verified” on each respective platform.



# COAST GUARD MEMBERS





# Social Media Use Activity Requirements

Personnel are encouraged to engage responsibly in online activity related to the Coast Guard and related topics—consistent with their personal expertise, experiences, and knowledge. In addition to ensuring Coast Guard content is accurate and appropriate, personnel must be careful when posting Coast Guard-related content on social networking sites, blogs, or on other websites since the lines between personal and professional use can be blurred. It is vital for every team member to understand they represent the Coast Guard at all times—online conduct must consistently embody the Coast Guard core values.

Coast Guard personnel have an obligation to maintain appropriate communication and conduct with officer and enlisted personnel, peers, superiors, and subordinates regardless of whether the communication is conducted via social media, through the media, or other forms of communication, such as e-mail, instant messaging, or texting. Members should always use their best judgment and avoid inappropriate behavior.

## Roles and Definitions

Coast Guard personnel are allowed to participate responsibly in official, unofficial, and personal online activity. Online activity includes posting and sharing content on social media, engaging in online communications (sites and activities are subject to some limitations imposed by operations security (OPSEC) and information security (INFOSEC), to include sensitive security information and information that is otherwise classified).

For this document, “**social media**” refers to digital tools and technologies that allow users to view, share, display, post, network, create and/or download communications in the form(s) of text, photos, videos, graphics, documents, or other multimedia materials.

When Coast Guard personnel utilize social media, they are doing so in one of three capacities:

“**Official**” refers to content posted by Coast Guard personnel pertaining to their official duties.

“**Unofficial**” refers to content about the Coast Guard posted by Coast Guard personnel when not speaking in their official capacity. These communications are not initiated by the Coast Guard or reviewed through any official Coast Guard process and do not involve content approved or released by a responsible Coast Guard authority. If you are speaking as a Coast Guard member or about Coast Guard operations or issues, but are not doing so in your official capacity, such content is “unofficial.”

“**Personal**” refers to content posted where you are not speaking as a Coast Guard member and the Coast Guard is not the subject.

**Discernible** refers to the ability for someone to identify a member’s affiliation with the Coast Guard based on attributes or activities related to the member’s social media use. For instance, a profile picture or other photos in uniform, a job description, or frequent posts acknowledging affiliation.

**Disclaimers:** Ordinarily, Coast Guard personnel are not required to post a disclaimer disavowing government sanction or endorsement on their personal social media account, whether for personal or unofficial activity, like posts about shipmates’ activities or achievements, or factual posts about a member’s own activities.

Coast Guard personnel who use their social media accounts to post opinions about Coast Guard policies, programs, or activities shall include the following disclaimer when the author’s Coast Guard affiliation is discernible:

“These views are mine and should not be construed as the views of the U.S. Coast Guard.”

**Note:** Using a disclaimer does not excuse conduct that otherwise violates law, regulation, or policy.

**Limitations on Content.** Coast Guard personnel must avoid inappropriate and/or offensive behavior on social networking platforms or through other forms of communication that harm good order and discipline or bring discredit upon themselves, their unit, or the Coast Guard.

## Personal Monetization

The entrepreneurial role of “influencers” who receive payment in exchange for views or endorsements is a rapidly expanding small business venture. This emerging capability presents added complexity for Coast Guard personnel producing official, unofficial, or personal works. Coast Guard members must avoid using their Coast Guard affiliation for private gain, whether intentionally or not, without specific authority to do so. Specifically, Coast Guard members must not directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, receive compensation (money, credit, gifts, and publicity) for their participation, presence, or production of any medium or from a non-federal entity as a result of, or association to, leveraging their name and rank, image or likeness as a current service member, current affiliation to the Coast Guard or as a result of access to equipment or information that would otherwise be unavailable to a member of the public.

Simply put, you cannot use your military affiliation or access to government resources to benefit personally from a non-federal entity. This applies to online or social media activities, such as producing podcasts, serving as brand ambassadors or influencers, receiving ad revenue from websites, blogs, videos, or social media content, pages, and accounts. Questions should be directed to CG-0922, Area or District Public Affairs Officers, and/or your servicing legal office.

## Political Activities

There are specific guidelines and limitations for Coast Guard members and civilians related to political activities and communications under the federal Hatch Act. Political activities are activities directed at the success or failure of a political party, candidate for partisan political office, or partisan political group. All Coast Guard personnel must be aware of the limitations that affect their participation in political activities including using social media for political purposes. Civilian employees cannot use social media for political activities while on duty, including teleworking, or in any federal workplace. There are significant restrictions on political activities by military members at all times. For guidance on limitations on political activities, please contact your servicing legal office.



# Balancing First Amendment

Like private citizens, Coast Guard members have a right to free speech under the First Amendment. However, the U.S. Supreme Court has long recognized that First Amendment protections do not apply to military members to the same extent that they do other citizens. Military members are entitled to First Amendment protections only when such protections do not impair the military's necessity for obedience and discipline. Coast Guard military members are subject to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and applicable Coast Guard and/or Department of Homeland Security regulations and policies at all times, even when off duty. This includes Coast Guard Reserve members who are serving on active duty and/or whose affiliation to the Coast Guard can be discerned. Civilian employees enjoy broad but not unlimited free speech rights away from the workplace.

Commenting, posting, or linking to material that violates the UCMJ or Coast Guard and/or Department of Homeland Security regulations may result in administrative or disciplinary action, to include administrative separation, and may subject Coast Guard civilians to appropriate disciplinary action.

Service members may not actively advocate supremacist, extremist, or criminal gang doctrine, ideology, or causes, including those that advance, encourage, or advocate illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, ethnicity, or national origin. Service members may not advance, encourage, or advocate the use of force, violence, or criminal activity or otherwise advance efforts to deprive individuals of their civil rights.

## Accountability

Members who violate laws, regulations, or policies pertaining to the inappropriate and prohibited online conduct may be subject to administrative or disciplinary action, or may be subject to action under the UCMJ. An example of behavior that may violate the UCMJ includes: Posting targeted online content which is defamatory, threatening, harassing or which discriminates based on a person's race, color, sex, gender, age, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, or other protected criteria, which is prohibited and may be punished under Article 92 of the UCMJ

Other applicable UCMJ and federal criminal law violations that may relate to online/social media use:

- Article 82. Solicitation
- Article 88. Contempt toward officials
- Article 89. Disrespect toward superior commissioned officer
- Article 91. Insubordinate conduct toward warrant officer or petty officer
- Article 117. Provoking speeches or gestures
- Article 133. Conduct unbecoming
- Article 134. General Article
- 18 U.S.C § 2385. Advocating overthrow of the Government
- 18 U.S.C § 2387. Activities affecting the Armed Forces generally
- 18 U.S.C § 2388. Activities affecting the Armed Forces during war

*If you wouldn't say it in front of your grandmother or your commanding officer, you shouldn't post it online.*

# Five Social Media Engagement Tips for Every Member of Team Coast Guard

---

## 1 Be Respectful

Keep in mind the Coast Guard's second core value: **Respect**. We treat each other and those we serve with fairness, dignity, respect, and compassion. These same tenets apply in the online and social media environment.

## 2 Stay in your lane

Whether communicating in an official, unofficial, or personal capacity, stick to what you know, are responsible for, or are authorized to speak about. Avoid talking about issues that are outside of your job. If you feel compelled to offer an opinion, be sure to express it as such.

## 3 Understand online privacy

Personnel who use social media should understand and consider that nothing posted online is truly private—even if shared in a direct message, closed group, or with “only me” type privacy settings. Users should never assume confidentiality online regardless of how strict privacy settings are configured.

## 4 Avoid trolls

Trolls are users who create discord online or on social media by posting upsetting, inflammatory, or off-topic posts, messages, GIFs, and memes. Resist the urge to debate, correct, or halt these engagements. Trolls thrive on continuing the engagement and typically never let another user have the last word.

## 5 Be an Ambassador

Every member of the Coast Guard team has an opportunity to help tell the Coast Guard story, including the reward and appeal for working for our service. Most often, personal perspectives, stories, and photos can span well beyond official communication channels. Sharing your story can inform the American public of the great things the Coast Guard does day in and day out.



# COMMANDS & PUBLIC AFFAIRS



# Commanders and Leaders

Leading Coast Guard missions and people is rewarding and challenging. This is true in the era of social media, but conversations can quickly lead to conflict and misinformation exists across the digital domains. Negative stories or situations going viral is nothing new. There is an increasing propensity for viral content to spur “mass social media outrage” which can quickly inundate personal or official accounts with harassing engagement activity— inducing stress for Coast Guard members and the chain of command.

## Leading People

As a Coast Guard leader, you are challenged with helping your workforce navigate the social media and online landscape—providing mentorship and standards while respecting First Amendment rights and encouraging respectful, open dialogue. Commanding officers, officers-in-charge, and supervisors at all levels are expected to discuss this guidance with their personnel, and ensure teams are familiar with the Coast Guard’s policies regarding social media and online conduct. Here is a sampling of talking points that may assist your discussions:

- Each of us are representatives of the Coast Guard at all times.
- Coast Guard personnel are allowed to participate responsibly in official, unofficial, and personal online activity, but it’s important to know your role.
- Disclaimers are not normally required for personal or unofficial use, but may be depending on how you represent yourself or your opinions online.
- All personnel must avoid the appearance that their activities imply Coast Guard or DHS sponsorship, approval, or endorsement of a partisan political candidate, campaign, or cause. This includes online conduct.
- Free speech means considerable latitude in what’s displayed online, but personnel should consider the impact on the public and on shipmates of displaying controversial content.
- Members who violate laws, regulations, or policies pertaining to inappropriate and prohibited online conduct may be subject to administrative or disciplinary action, or may be subject to action under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

## Leading Platforms

Commanders and leaders of a unit that already have or are considering an official USCG account on a social media platform must place due diligence in the planning, creation, oversight, and review of the medium. The ultimate release authority and responsibility lies with the commanding officer or officer in charge. Aside from working with unit-level social media managers on communication priorities for the platform, here are some additional steps leaders can take to reduce risks associated with operating an official USCG social media account:

- Ensure there are at least two social media managers who can access the account to deal with troublesome comments or to respond to messages and posts.
- Ensure your District or Area Public Affairs staff is listed as an Admin on your unit page.
- Ensure social media managers receive adequate training from public affairs and complete OPSEC training at least annually.
- In the event of a crisis communications scenario, consider vetting all messages related to the incident to a senior level member of command, or higher level office, prior to release.
- Have a discussion with unit and family members about the unit’s social media presence and encourage safe practices.

# Public Affairs and PA Representatives

As a member of the Coast Guard public affairs community, or as a social media manager for unit level accounts, you serve a pivotal role in telling the Coast Guard story. Your efforts help to build rapport with the local community, inform and educate the many maritime stakeholders, and increase awareness of the Coast Guard mission and capability with the American public. While your role brings incredible opportunity, it also comes with responsibility. This section provides information that is critical to the success and sustainability of the Coast Guard's strategic communication objectives and overall social media program. Thank you for your willingness and commitment to professionally represent your unit, the Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security.

## General Expectations

Regardless of how you were chosen, what your background is, or how much you know about the field of social media, everyone who represents the Coast Guard in social communication has a unique opportunity to engage in online conversations about the Coast Guard every day. It is a great opportunity and puts you at the forefront of telling the Coast Guard story and managing its reputation.

With the assignment to manage and conduct social media on behalf of the Coast Guard, you must remember: everything you do can impact public trust. This is the foundation upon which the success of public affairs and social media is built. As part of your duties, you will actively engage the public, ensuring that you consider and promote transparency and unity while also ensuring security, accuracy, policy, and propriety measures are followed. The Coast Guard is empowering you in your role as a designated professional communicator.

## Specific Requirements

All official Coast Guard accounts, if the platform allows, shall be registered or linked to an official uscg.mil email address. Utilizing official email addresses ensures that recovery information can be obtained—even if you become unable to access your personal email for some reason. To reduce the risk of getting hacked, every official social media account should enable two-step authentication. The accounts should be linked to a government issued cell phone for added security.

## Page Management

Determine what you plan to achieve with your social media presence and reassess routinely. Make sure you have a way forward and establish communication goals for your unit. Investing time in the planning of social media content will result in better engagement that better represents your unit's brand.

This handbook is a great start, but there are more materials at your disposal, including the External Affairs Manual and External Affairs Tactics, Techniques and Procedures. Reach out to your respective District or Area PAOs for more information. You can also visit [uscg.mil/socialmedia](https://uscg.mil/socialmedia) for the latest information.

After you've completed basic research, work with your command to develop a social media strategy as part of your unit's larger communication strategy. The Coast Guard has a strategy for each social media platform. This helps your organization refine its focus. During this phase of the planning process, it's also helpful to look at how other units are using social media and seek additional training opportunities, such as content posted to the Defense Information School's training site, [pavilion.dinfos.edu](https://pavilion.dinfos.edu).

Once you've done your research and you're confident in setting up a social media presence, you will need to request a presence through your servicing public affairs office—most likely a District or Area office or CG-0922.

Registering social media sites is required. All official Coast Guard social media sites must be registered with CG -0922. A link to the registration form can be obtained from your servicing District or Area public affairs office or downloaded from [uscg.mil/socialmedia](https://uscg.mil/socialmedia). Commands shall update their registration if their designated social media representatives change.

Approval is just the beginning. Make sure you post often (at least 3-5 times per week, per authorized platform) and keep your social media presence active. A stagnant social media presence is an ineffective social media presence and it can hinder public trust and understanding. Cutters or units without consistent access should engage with unit Ombudsmen, Auxiliaries, or District/Area offices for help with maintaining a constant presence.

Ensure all content released to social media complies with principles of operation security (OPSEC) and Security, Accuracy, Policy, and Propriety (SAPP).

Additionally, it is important to consistently engage in social media monitoring and listening. Monitoring is the process of collecting what is being said about topics related to a unit or brand whereas listening is tuning in to specific channels, conversations, or campaigns to evaluate the effectiveness of the social media activity or presence. Engaging in social media monitoring and listening offer several benefits, including:

- Understanding how audiences view the unit as a whole or specific topics, and how better to adapt messages to reach audiences more effectively
- Learning what types of products or formats yield the best results (reach, engagements)
- Mitigating risks or issues ahead of time by understanding what issues or concerns exist among the fan base
- Identifying page- or channel-specific trends such as best days or times to post content and types of content, such as graphics versus photos versus videos
- Collect and respond to questions, and prepare future products based off of feedback

**Before posting to social media, check for S.A.P.P.**

**S**ECURITY  
Avoid discussing classified subjects or sensitive information that could violate operational security.

**A**CCURACY  
Vet information to prevent release of inaccurate statements. Refrain from succumbing to the temptation to make assumptions or speculate.

**P**OLICY  
Know the guidance and policies associated with the release of information before engaging external audiences.

**P**ROPRIETY  
Every release of information should be in good taste and should not violate the expectation of a receiving audience.



# DISCOVER

**SOCIAL MEDIA POST**  
Someone has discovered or reported a post about the USCG—Is it positive and respectful?

# USCG SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSE GUIDE

## EVALUATE

YES

NO

### CONCURRENCE

If the post is factual or respectfully opinionated and does not violate comment policy or otherwise offend your audience, you can acknowledge it, respond to it, or let it stand. Do you want to respond?

NO

### LET IT STAND

Let the post stand, no response needed.

YES

### SHARE SUCCESS

Do you wish to engage with author and tell your story?

### “TROLLS”

Is the post’s intent to bash or degrade, or to cause havoc?

NO

YES

### MONITOR THE SITE

Avoid engaging with specific posts from trolls. Monitor the engagement and consider next steps if the issues continues.

### “RAGER”

Is the post an angry rant or cynical/satirical in nature?

NO

### “MISGUIDED”

Does post include false info that could offend or be dangerous?

YES

### FIX THE FACTS

Are you willing and able to respond with factual information directly?

YES

NO

### “DISGRUNTLED”

Is the post a result of a negative experience?

YES

### RESTORATION

Do you want and feel comfortable addressing the situation? Is there a reasonable explanation or solution?

NO

### FINAL EVALUATION

Is the post a result of a negative experience?

YES

## RESPOND

## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN RESPONDING

### TRANSPARENCY

Disclose your USCG connection

### SOURCING

Include links to official info source

### TIMELINESS

Respond to post as soon as possible

### TONE

Use a professional and courteous tone

### INFLUENCE

Incorporate USCG story into response

# Accessibility Requirements

As a public organization, the Coast Guard is responsible for making every reasonable effort to share information that is accessible to persons with disabilities. Accessibility of our content is mandated by law. This mandate, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, applies to nearly all areas of the workplace including documents, audiovisual materials, web sites and even social media. Examples of disseminating accessible products include: documents and graphics with “alt text” descriptions embedded, including closed captioning or scripts with videos, and ensuring color contrast ratios are sufficient. More information on Section 508 requirements can be found by visiting [Digital.gov](http://Digital.gov), [Section 508.gov](http://Section508.gov), or by contacting the Office of Accessibility Systems & Technology (CG-6824).

## Social Media Records Management

The Presidential and Federal Records Act Amendments of 2014 (Public Law 113-187) solidified electronic records as federal records. Social media accounts created by, or used for, official USCG business likely contain federal records. Social media content on official platforms are considered federal records if they:

- document agency business;
- are circulated or made available to USCG employees for official purposes; or
- contain unique information that contributes to the understanding of USCG policies, decisions, actions, missions, and responsibilities

In order to comply with federal regulations, USCG social media managers must be aware of precautions and steps needed to properly preserve applicable social media records and accounts. Examples of these actions include: conducting regular backups of current social media accounts, providing backup records to applicable USCG or DHS records management officials, and creating an archive of discontinued sites. Additional information is available at [uscg.mil/socialmedia](http://uscg.mil/socialmedia).

## Copyright

As professional communicators for the Coast Guard, it is imperative to understand and obey copyright laws and regulations when conducting official communications. Understanding the difference between public domain, copyright, and fair use is the first method to avoid issues.

Works are considered public domain when they’ve never had a copyright protection or have a protection that is no longer applicable due to time expiration, non-renewal of protection status, or willful retraction of copyright by the owner. A work being publicly available does not make it public domain.

A copyright is an exclusive legal right given to an originator or assignee to: print, publish, perform, film or record literary, artistic or musical material; perform a work publicly via a digital audio transmission; or to authorize others to do the same. Copyright protects ideas that are fixed to tangible mediums of expression such as manuscripts, photographs, paintings, video recordings, and musical recordings among others. Copyright is considered personal property and therefore the copyright holder owns the work, controls its use, and may transfer rights. Copyright owners can legally give permission to use the work, provided the agreement is in writing and signed by the owner.

Fair use is a principle that allows some limited reproduction and use of copyright materials without permission and payment of a fee. To be considered fair use, the material must create some social, cultural or political benefit and outweigh any harm suffered by the copyright owner.

Note: Government employees can be sued for copyright infringement. When it doubt, check with USCG legal representatives.



# FAMILIES, AUXILIARISTS, RETIREES



# Families

As a family member of a Coast Guard member or civilian, you are a pivotal representative of our service. Your ongoing support enables the Coast Guard to perform its mission day in and day out.

Coast Guard families are encouraged to participate safely and responsibly in online and social media activities. Online activity includes posting and sharing content on social media, participating in engagements, and sharing content—provided information related to Coast Guard topics comply with operational security (OPSEC) and information security (INFOSEC) principles.

Social content shared by military members and their families is a target for those looking to gain access to sensitive information in order to impersonate, blackmail, intimidate, or worse. Here are a few tips to help keep your family and everyone on Team Coast Guard safe:

- Don't post specific whereabouts, activities or modes of transportation of Coast Guard members.
- Be general about dates and locations concerning a Coast Guard member's travel.
- Don't post details on duration or number of members on temporary duty or deployment.

You're encouraged to use social media to engage in support networks, such as Ombudsman groups, unit morale pages, child care groups, or local civic activities. These groups are not official Coast Guard groups or accounts. You do not need permission to create similar groups. However, with all unofficial, closed, or "private" groups, you should always treat the content you post or share as public information. As such, you may want to limit the membership and visibility of the group to help protect the information exchanged.

You can help support public trust, understanding, and support for Coast Guard members and specific missions by sharing loved ones' social media content and experiences with your followers and friends.

# Auxiliarists

Members of the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary have long been pivotal in assisting the Coast Guard and Department of Homeland Security missions. Located in communities throughout America, Auxiliarists work passionately alongside Coast Guard personnel and other authorities to ensure the safety and security of the nation's borders and waterways. Auxiliarists have an important and interesting story to tell and doing so helps promote global understanding and acceptance of the Coast Guard as well as bolstering safety initiatives for the maritime industry and American public.



While the Auxiliary has its own collection of official social media accounts, Auxiliarists are welcomed and encouraged to follow and engage with Coast Guard official accounts. Doing so provides another avenue for Auxiliarists to share a wealth of information and experience with the Coast Guard's audiences. All online and social media communications should be made after OPSEC and INFOSEC considerations. For questions specifically related to Auxiliary social media accounts, activities, or policy, members should contact the Auxiliary Public Affairs Directorate.

# Retirees

Coast Guard members who have served and reached retirement have helped to pave the way for those still serving today and the next generation to follow. Thankfully, many retirees remain interested and engaged with the Coast Guard mission, people, and equipment long after their service has ended. The Coast Guard retiree community is welcomed and encouraged to follow official social media channels and engage often.

Here are a few tips on how you can maximize your contributions and be a valued member of the Coast Guard family online:

- Share your story! Your experience, insight, and patriotism is valuable and inspirational.
- Continue to lead by remaining positive and demonstrating appreciation for those still serving.
- Be open and supportive to change. Much like missions, processes, and uniforms changed during your service, the Coast Guard will continue to evolve and your support and positivity will go a long way toward accepted change, strong morale, and mission accomplishment.

Honoring the Coast Guard's vast history is an important part of educating audiences on the Coast Guard legacy. If you have stories or photos you would like to share for consideration, please message one of the official Coast Guard accounts.





## APPENDIX A ESTABLISHING AN OFFICIAL SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT



# Does my unit need a social media account?

The Coast Guard has more than 300 social media accounts across the enterprise. Yet, CG-092 receives requests for new or additional social media accounts at least monthly. While it is commendable that Coast Guard units wish to expand the methods or efficiency of their communications, thought and consideration should be given before beginning a new official account. A new or additional account requires more planning, additional content, regular monitoring, and a commitment to public interaction online. Adding an official social media account is committing the unit to that account for the long term, as it becomes difficult to abandon an account once a fan base is built and after rapport is established with various audiences.

Before requesting or launching a social media account, review USCG social media policies and resource materials available at [uscg.mil/socialmedia](https://uscg.mil/socialmedia) and consider:

- Do you need a new or additional social media channel?
- Who is your target audience and does it match the platform you're requesting?
- What type of information are you wanting to post (i.e., internal/external, policy)?
- What are your goals and how is this platform going to help meet those goals?
- How many people are needed to maintain the platform and who will those members be?
- Do you have the staffing to monitor the account at least once every 24 hours, respond to messages in a timely manner, and post original content at least three to five times weekly?

Once these questions have been answered, units can begin the process of requesting an account using the steps below.

## Requesting an official social media account

In general, units are authorized one official social media account. Work with your district public affairs office to determine what requirements exist to create a new account and to identify specific training requirements.

Before requesting an account, units/users must receive command approval. Once approved, designated social media managers should complete the necessary training and ensure proper knowledge on OPSEC and SAPP principles, accessibility and records management standards, and proper administrative requirements, such as:

- How to properly set up the page (i.e, official government page)
- Select an appropriate name/handle for the page/account
- Establish appropriate privacy and comment settings
- Completely filling out the platform's "about" section to include public website address, contact info, and unit information
- How to post the mandatory USCG comment policy
- How to register the social media presence with Commandant (CG-092)
- Draft content and site management strategy

When discussing requirements with the relevant public affairs office, if it is determined the account is not authorized for the unit level, a waiver request must be submitted to Commandant (CG-092). Procedures and a template for these requests can be found at [uscg.mil/socialmedia](https://uscg.mil/socialmedia).



# APPENDIX B FAQS





# Frequently Asked Questions

## **What prompted messages about social media and responsibility?**

- Coast Guard leadership wants to help the work force plot a course in this space and provide standards while respecting First Amendment rights and encouraging respectful dialogue.

## **How can the Coast Guard say that members and employees represent the Coast Guard at all times?**

- Just as military members are subject to the Uniform Code of Military justice at all times, they are accountable 24/7 for their representation of the Coast Guard. The public is attentive to members of the armed forces, even when members think no one is watching. Similarly, employees' connection with the Coast Guard is often well known within their communities.
- All personnel should assume that members of the public with whom they interact see them as representatives of the service at all times.

## **Are all members and employees spokespersons for the Service?**

- The Service does designate official spokespersons to speak about official matters. But the Service has confidence in all of our personnel and encourage them to talk about the things they do, and the ways they execute and support Coast Guard missions.
- Except for those personnel whose official duties require them to speak to the public (like public affairs officers, Commanding Officers, and OICs), talking about what personnel do in the Coast Guard is an “unofficial” activity.
- Personnel should stick to what they know from personal knowledge and not pass on secondhand information that could be inaccurate. Personnel should also use caution when expressing opinions about Coast Guard activities when engaging in unofficial social media activity.
- The local public affairs office can always assist personnel if they desire to speak in an unofficial capacity.

## **How do personnel engage “responsibly” in social media?**

- Talk about what you know from personal knowledge.
- Don't pass on secondhand information that could be inaccurate or contradict the Coast Guard's position.
- Use caution when expressing opinions about Coast Guard activities because you don't know how they might be interpreted and they could bring discredit upon you, your unit, or the Service.
- Avoid intemperate or argumentative language.
- Don't publish content that is defamatory, threatening, or harassing or which discriminates based on a person's race, color, sex, gender, age, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation.
- Be careful in retweeting or otherwise “republishing” information whose source you don't know;

even if the content is unobjectionable the original author may not be.

- Consider that the audience on social media is virtually unlimited. While you may only intend for the post to be seen by a small group of people in your network, there is nothing that says the post will stay within that group. Nothing on social media is truly private.

### **Don't personnel have a First Amendment right to free speech?**

- Coast Guard social media policy is meant to accommodate the First Amendment rights that personnel enjoy.
- The U.S. Supreme Court has long recognized that First Amendment protections do not apply to military members to the same extent that they do other citizens. Military members are entitled to First Amendment protections only when such protections do not impair the military's necessity for obedience and discipline. Civilian employees enjoy broad but not unlimited free speech rights away from the workplace.
- All personnel have the right to express opinions about the Coast Guard and other subject matter, limited by rules about political activity and, for military members, by the law that prohibits a variety of conduct including contempt towards superiors, and conduct inconsistent with good order and discipline or that discredits the Service.
- Military officers are further restricted by Article 88 of the UCMJ, which makes it a crime for a commissioned officer to use contemptuous words against the President, Vice President, Congress, or certain other individuals. The words need not be spoken in the presence of the individual, and it doesn't matter whether the words were used in an official or personal capacity.

### **Should personnel include a disclaimer when they talk "unofficially" on social media about Coast Guard activities?**

- Personnel don't have to include a disclaimer when all they talk about are factual activities in which they participated and about which they have firsthand knowledge.
- A disclaimer is necessary when expressing an opinion about the Coast Guard and the online context makes apparent that the author has a Coast Guard affiliation.

### **Do personnel ever have to include a disclaimer when they engage in social media activity on their personal accounts?**

- A disclaimer isn't necessary in personal social media activity, even where the author's Coast Guard connection is apparent, and where a post may include Coast Guard people and places, like shipmates and social activities. No disclaimer is necessary in circumstances where the context is obviously innocuous and personal.
- However, using a disclaimer on a personal post does not excuse what is otherwise a violation of law, regulation, or policy. Even when speaking in a purely personal capacity and disclaiming any Coast Guard affiliation, a military member may still be held accountable for inappropriate and/

or offensive behavior that harms good order and discipline or brings discredit upon themselves, their unit, or the Coast Guard.

- A disclaimer is necessary where Coast Guard affiliation is apparent, the author expresses opinions about the Coast Guard or other subject matter, and a reader/observer would more likely than not be confused about whether the content represents Coast Guard views or would conclude that it does. This is considered unofficial social media activity, even though it occurs on a personal account, because it is posted by a Coast Guard person and the subject matter is the Coast Guard. Because it includes opinions regarding Coast Guard policies, programs, or activities, it also requires a disclaimer.

### **Are there limits on social media activity in connection with the Presidential election campaigns?**

- Employees can publish personal social media content expressing personal views about candidates, parties, issues, and encourage voting for a candidate or party but not while on duty, in any federal workplace, while wearing a uniform or official insignia, or while using any federally owned or leased vehicle. Employees who are teleworking are considered to be “in the federal workplace” when they are on duty, even if they are in their own homes. Employees can always encourage their fellow citizens to vote if they do so without indicating that the fellow citizen should vote for a certain candidate or party. A member who does so and is reasonably identifiable as a Coast Guardsman must include a disclaimer. Members cannot encourage voting about a candidate or party and they cannot solicit campaign contributions.
- All personnel must avoid the appearance that their activities imply Coast Guard or DHS sponsorship, approval, or endorsement of a partisan political candidate, campaign, or cause.