

DHS Science and Technology Directorate

Virtual Social Media Working Group

Background and Purpose

Social media and collaborative technologies have become critical components in emergency preparedness, response, and recovery. From the international response efforts after major tsunamis to hurricane and snowstorm recovery across the United States, government officials and response partners are increasingly turning to social media to share information and connect with the community. Implementing these new technologies, however, requires that responding agencies adopt new tools, methods, and strategies.

To address the challenges associated with the adoption of social media, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology Directorate (DHS S&T) established the Virtual Social Media Working Group (VSMWG) in 2010. The mission of the VSMWG is to provide recommendations to the emergency preparedness and response community on the safe and sustainable use of social media technologies before, during, and after emergencies.



Social media includes social networking sites, photo and video-sharing, blogging and microblogging, location-based check-in tools, and more. (PHOTO CREDIT: WWW.DESIGNRFX.COM)

Meet the VSMWG

Drawn from a cross-section of subject matter experts from local, tribal, state, territorial, and federal practitioners, VSMWG members are establishing and collecting best practices and solutions that can be leveraged by public safety officials and responders throughout the nation's emergency response community.

VSMWG membership includes: non-profit organizations; local fire and police; local and county emergency management and public health; academia, and several federal agencies. The VSMWG hosts a monthly virtual meeting to discuss best practices, hear presentations from leaders in the social media field, and to collaborate on documents, routinely inviting other interested parties to join in the discussions.

Activities

The VSMWG has published three guidance documents since 2010 with input from the first responder community, group members, and partners. These documents are available at FirstResponder.gov, and include:

Social Media Strategy – provides a high-level introduction to social media, its benefits for public safety, and best practices from agencies already using social media tools;

Next Steps Strategy – serves as a follow-up to the *Social Media Strategy* document, presenting challenges and providing next steps and best practices for public safety agencies developing and implementing social media; and

Community Engagement Guidance and Best Practices – shares best practices for public safety agencies and partner organizations on how to use social media to successfully engage community members and stakeholders.

Members of the VSMWG have presented at several events, including two webinars for FEMA's Emergency Management Institute, the International Disaster Conference and Expo 2013, the National Volunteer Fire Council Annual Board-Meeting, the National Capital Region Social Media in Emergencies Summit, and the National Association of Government Communicators Annual Communications School.

During Hurricane Sandy, responders used Twitter for sharing information on storm aid, evacuation orders, and more; maps populated with crowd-sourced reports of available resources; Facebook pages for volunteer and donation management; centralized websites for rumor control, and mobile apps. The VSMWG is now analyzing the use of social media during the storm to identify and discuss gaps in policy, process, and technology; best practices; and guidance.



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To learn more about the Virtual Social Media Working Group, please visit DHS First Responder Communities of Practice at www.communities.firstresponder.gov