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IACP Center for Social Media)

Recently Northern California law enforcement was rocked by horrific news when the Hayward Police Department suffered the tragic loss of Sgt. Scott Lunger, shot and killed in the line of duty on July 22nd.

As we see time and again across the country, news breaks on Twitter and other social media platforms and is then carried by the mainstream media. It was no different for this case. Unfortunately, sometimes we in law enforcement are our own worst enemy. In the case above, it was other law enforcement departments that helped break the news of the officer's death on Twitter, instead of the primary jurisdiction handling the incident. In the interest of breaking news first, the mainstream media does not hesitate to rely on a tweet from any credible law enforcement social media account to act as their source for verification of information.

In the case of Sgt. Lunger's incident, many of us watched the news break that morning about the officer involved shooting (OIS).



The official tweet from Hayward PD that morning (shown above) advised that they were not releasing the condition of the officer. We can safely assume that during that time, Hayward PD personnel were in the midst of identifying, locating, and delivering the tragic news to Sgt. Lunger's family. At the same time, we know that in any OIS or critical incident, a flurry of text messages go out and it doesn't take much time for our tight-knit law enforcement family in neighboring jurisdictions to figure out what happened. Hayward PD officially tweeted the tragic news of Sgt. Lunger's passing a little over two hours later. Unfortunately, many well-intentioned agencies started to tweet condolences or had changed their profile photos to include mourning badges up to an hour before Hayward PD had an opportunity to officially announce the information. The mainstream media immediately picked up on these tweets and

shifted their reporting to announce that Sgt. Lunger had died, many running screen shots of law enforcement tweets as part of their "breaking news" reporting.

For the record, I absolutely believe these agencies and law enforcement individuals were well-meaning when they sent these posts and tweets. However, we must remind ourselves to take a step back and remember that family and loved ones of the downed officer come first. If tragedy strikes, they deserve to hear it in person from our own personnel, not on social media. Therefore, before tweeting or posting sympathy messages, it is imperative to go to the affected agency's social media accounts or website and see what they have officially announced. Until then, we must maintain "radio [and social media] silence" out of respect and allow the affected agency to make proper notifications. In the parlance of public information officers, we call this "staying in your lane." It's simply not your news to break.



On a similar note, news of critical incidents can spread virally from internal department sources as "significant others" or family members post information about a critical incident to each other's Facebook walls. As the extended law enforcement family learns of an officer's passing, many people begin to change their profile photos to mourning bands or "thin blue line" logos. These posts and avatar changes, while absolutely done out of sympathy and respect, can prematurely announce the bad news to the fallen officer's family (who will likely be in the extended social network). To that end, departments should take time to inform and educate their personnel and family members that, they too, should wait and defer to official news from the department so that the officer's family can hear the tragic news in person.

Tami McMillan, national board member from Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.), is often called upon to be a "lifeline" to law enforcement survivors during the aftermath of sudden, tragic, and often violent line-of-duty death incidents. In her opinion, premature sharing of an officer's passing on social media is a huge problem across the country and can unduly traumatize family members who have not yet received official notification from their loved one's agency. In one recent

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#STAYINYOURLANE (CONTINUED)

incident, a family member learned of the officer's passing from social media, three hours before the agency representatives knocked on her door. We must change this.

What can we do? Let's all take a step back and make a commitment. When a line of duty death occurs, remember to check the affected agency's social media channels for official news and notifications prior to discussing the incident on your department social media channels. Train your personnel to do the same on their personal accounts so that if tragedy strikes, we allow the hard news to be done in person, not online. Just because the media is posting somber photos of officers gathered at a hospital or making inferences about the status of an officer, most will usually refrain from an official announcement until they see the news coming from police department accounts. Your well intentioned tweet just became verification for the media to put out "breaking news."

I was recently talking about this topic with Lt. Zach Perron from Palo Alto PD and he summed up the situation perfectly saying, "In today's law enforcement social media environment,

where a premium is often placed on the timeliness of information dissemination, I think it's important to have a 'line of duty injury/death' exception. There should not be a 'rush to be first' in these situations. It's not a competition to see who can express their condolences fastest. The only police agency that should 'break' news of their officer's condition should be the employing agency, plain and simple."

Please Note: The C.O.P.S. National Office states in our Standard Operating Procedures, Section 11.3, Social Media Policy - D. When a line-of-duty death or other traumatic event occurs, no posting should be made until the event is made public by the agency.

If you would like to submit information to be included on National C.O.P.S. social media accounts or in any C.O.P.S. publication, please contact Sara Slone, Director of Public Relations, at sara_slone@nationalcops.org.