

# Collier deputies told to stay away from making comments online, or else

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**Documents**   [Collier County Sheriff's Office policy on Web sites](#)

Collier County sheriff's deputies are being told to zip their lips — or at least quiet their keyboards — when it comes to commenting on public Internet messaging boards and posting agency-related information on their personal Web pages.

The Sheriff's Office unveiled its new non-agency Web site policy in early June. Around the same time, Cpl. Paul Boliek, a 20-year veteran of the Sheriff's Office, was referred to Sheriff Kevin Rambosk for discipline after officials say he posted a derogatory comment on a public Web site and identified himself as an agency member.

Chief Greg Smith said the two are not related.

“It had nothing to do with the Paul Boliek situation,” Smith said of the new policy. “This was completely independent of that, and foreran that by a good three months.”

The policy, which was issued on June 5, states that agency members have a right, as private citizens, to have personal Web sites. However, the agency prohibits employees from posting “references to or about” the Sheriff's Office, agency staff or agency information obtained in a member's official capacity without permission from Rambosk or “his designee.”

Sheriff's Office employees are barred from posting images of the agency's uniforms, badges, patches or vehicles, and are not allowed to identify themselves online as Sheriff's Office members.

Smith said the policy applies to social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube, public messaging sites like the popular LEOAffairs.com, and news sites like naplesnews.com. The Sheriff's Office's public information staff currently comments on naplesnews.com under the moniker “CCSO\_Star.”

Sheriff's Office attorney Mike Hedberg said the policy does not abridge free speech. Previous policies already addressed issues like writing letters to newspapers. The only difference now is the online format, Hedberg said.

“What’s protected speech is speech of a private citizen on public concern,” Hedberg said. “It is not an absolute right if it is a speech of a member that interferes with the efficient operation of the agency. It can be regulated.”

After being sent a copy of the new policy, Brandon Hensler, spokesman for the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, said it appeared to be “vague and overbroad.”

“Furthermore, officers need advance notice of precisely what is expected of them, and this policy is not clear,” Hensler said. “Will officers be prohibited from posting their employer information on their Facebook page? What about family photos? The answer will depend on how the policy is interpreted, communicated to officers and staff, and most importantly — how it is implemented — to know whether it is a constitutional overstep.”

In Boliek’s case, Smith said Boliek, 41, made a “specific comment, which was derogatory, and he identified himself in an official manner.” Smith said he wasn’t sure on which site Boliek made the comment.

When asked about commenting on sites like LEOAffairs.com, Smith said, “For me, personally, I wouldn’t do it.” But he said the agency doesn’t have time to police sites like that and attempt to track down anonymous bloggers.

In an egregious case, violators could be terminated, Smith said.

“It is against the Sheriff’s policy as an agency representative and member to blog about anything without having the proper clearance,” Smith said. “If they identify themselves on that site or any other site, they would be held responsible for their content. ... If they didn’t sign their name and there’s no way to identify them, then there’s not much we can do about that.”

Regarding the new policy, one blogger on LEOAffairs.com, identified only as “Curious George,” said deputies will continue posting on public messaging boards if agency leaders fail to address problems.

“This site is a way to vent, like it or not, so if you do not want your dirty little secrets to be posted on a public site then CORRECT the problem when it is brought to your attention!” Curious George wrote. “This is how you keep stuff off of this board. Deputies will continue to post about problems that affect their job and (are) not corrected by staff; they will just do it under an assumed name instead of their real name.”

Chris Jordan, president of the Fraternal Order of Police organization representing Collier deputies, called the new policy appropriate. He described LEOAffairs.com as a “comic book-type Web page with bloggers hiding behind a keyboard to humiliate fellow brothers and sisters.”

“We understand that social networking is without doubt the way of the future, but we also believe there are limitations about what we can say and cannot say in public forums,” Jordan said.

The Lee County Sheriff's Office's "Internet Usage Policy" does not address personal Web sites, social networking sites or public message board comments. Naples police spokesman Michael Herman said his department does not have a specific policy regarding personal Web sites, but does have policies concerning the dissemination of confidential information.

"We do not have a policy concerning individuals voicing their own opinions," Herman said. "If someone were to do something that were to put the department in a bad light or bring discredit to the department, instances like that could be looked at on a case-by-case basis."