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LAW ENFORCEMENT

North Port employs social media to fight crime

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Across the country, law enforcement agencies have invested countless dollars in the latest crime fighting technologies.

But the North Port Police Department has closed about a dozen cases over the last year with two 21st century creations that cost the city nothing.

Facebook and Twitter are helping improve communication between North Port's officers and residents.

"I think people want to help us help (them)," city spokesman and public information officer Josh Taylor said. "We post a picture and ask 'Do you recognize this person?' And, usually, if it's someone local, we find out."

The department's Facebook posts have led to the arrest of a felony child neglect suspect; the surrender of the suspected driver in a hit and run; and the safe return of a missing woman suffering from dementia.

And that was all last month.

Those successes have resulted in North Port being named a national finalist in an award program recognizing the use of social media by local and state government agencies.

The 2016 Golden Post Awards committee reviewed more than 150 entries, and will reveal winners at the 2016 Government Social Media Conference and Expo in Reno, Nevada, on April 7. North Port is one of four finalists in the Social Media Strategy in Solving Crime category.

The award ceremony will coincide with the one-year anniversary of the police department's Facebook page, which Taylor created after joining the city in March of 2015.

A local who spent more than a decade working as a television journalist in Sarasota County, Taylor said he treats the department's social media "like it's our own newsroom."

People appear to be tuning in.

The North Port Police Department's Facebook page has garnered more than 9,500 "likes," putting it hot on the heels of the Sarasota Police Department's page. Followers on the department's Twitter account have swelled to more than 1,000.

"I didn't know what to expect really, but we're passing departments that are much bigger than us," Taylor said. "We started with nothing and we're averaging almost 1,000 additional (Facebook) followers per month."

To attract an audience, the department often mixes humor into its posts. Nearly 3,000 people shared a post asking residents to use their “inner Jedi” to help catch a Star Wars shirt-wearing man wanted on suspicion of 11 felonies.

The strategy is a breakaway from the tradition of sending press releases directly to news agencies. While the department still issues news reports, social media allows it to post updates directly to residents' laptops and phones.

For example, Taylor said, a post Wednesday night warning residents to obey the speed limit near Trionfo Avenue and Bullard Street or risk a traffic ticket reached 15,000 people in 15 hours.

When shots rang out at Blue Ridge Park last week, the department simultaneously disseminated updates to reporters and citizens.

The social media accounts also give the department a medium to display the day-to-day actions of officers that don't always make headlines, Taylor said.

Facebook favorites include photographs of officers helping citizens with broken down vehicles, meeting with schoolchildren and distributing toys to the community around Christmas.

Those small things show that officers are not only protecting the community, but serving it as well, Taylor said.

“They do things, and they don't even think twice about it,” he said. “I say 'Let's tell people about it.'”

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