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ALERT FEATURED

TikTok with cops: Albany police go viral on social media

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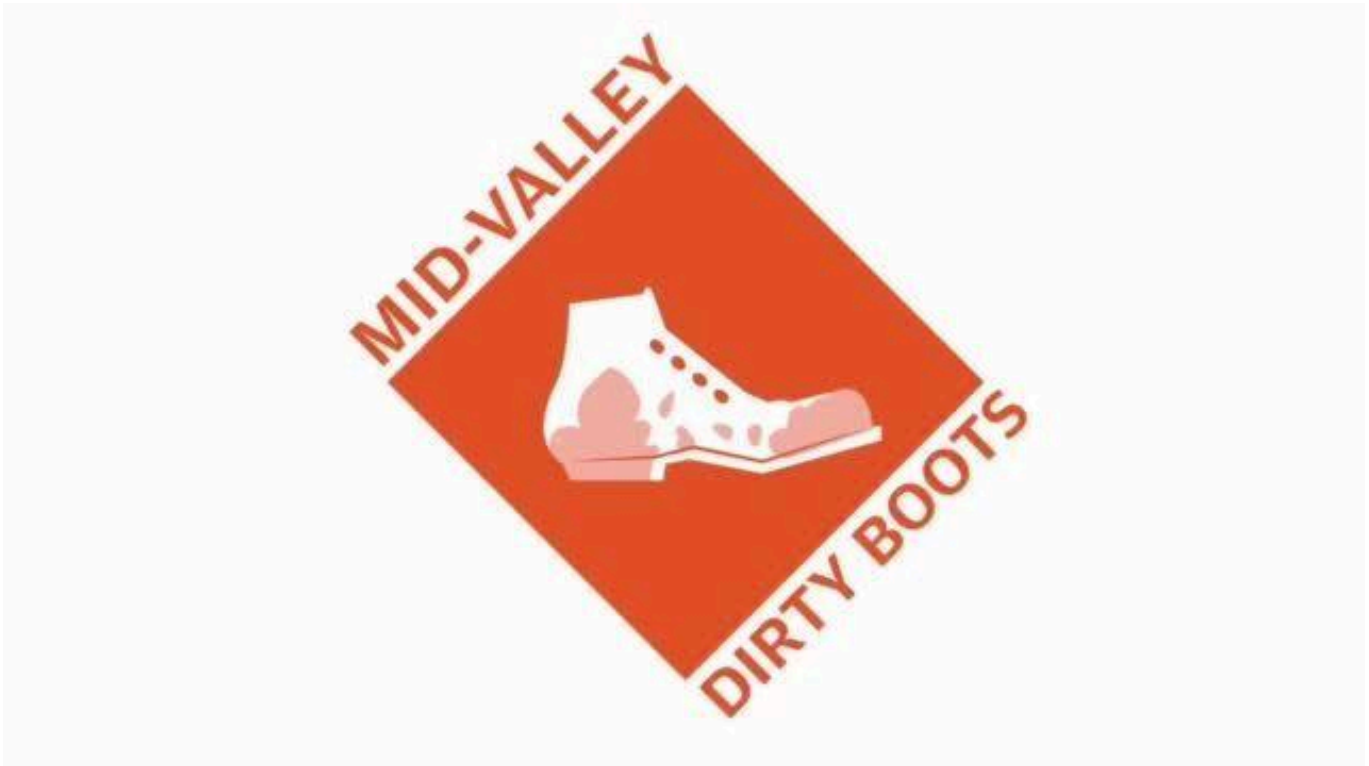
Laura Hawkins, community engagement officer, created a TikTok account for the Albany Police Department. Hawkin
Kylie Graham, Mid-Valley Media

Maddie Pfeifer

Popular video sharing app TikTok probably isn't the first place you'd check to see what the Albany Police Department is up to. But for nearly 700,000 people, TikTok is the place to be when it comes to APD.

Community Engagement Officer Laura Hawkins started the **agency's TikTok account** just before the pandemic. The first video was posted Feb. 28, 2020.

Now the account boasts around 698,900 followers and 11.6 million likes. The TikTok account is indicative of the agency's philosophy on social media and engaging with the community.



“The 21st century model of policing is more community-oriented,” Hawkins said. “We’re really trying to follow that model with more social media outreach with the community, ... just breaking that mold (of policing) and showing we’re just regular people who like to have fun and are not scary like the uniform can come across.”

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Trying something new

Hawkins admittedly didn't know much about TikTok when she started the account. The app wasn't as popular or well-known as it is now. But her daughter, who was 16 at the time, suggested the department consider making videos on the platform.

"There was a lot of hesitation, but we wanted to reach out to that younger crowd, and I thought this might be the solution," Hawkins said.

The account started to gain notoriety after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention repurposed a TikTok video from Albany PD in which officers imitated a shift change. In the video, the officers toss the keys to each other and avoid a hand shake or high five.

That video, posted March 5, 2020, now has around 6.1 million views. Hawkins said it was an eye-opening experience to see a national organization recognize one of her agency's videos.

In 2021, APD's TikTok again earned a shoutout from a well-known agency. Hawkins was attending a class put on by the FBI where officials talked about how TikTok could be a good platform for "humanizing the badge" and performing community outreach. The FBI showed some examples, including one from Albany police.

This was a sign that the agency was on the right track.

"We are very lucky to have a supportive community, and we have a supportive administration that sees the value in showing our other side, that we're fun and we're humans," Hawkins said.

A team effort

According to Hawkins, department personnel are usually pretty good sports about participating in the videos. Even **Chief Marcia Harnden** can be seen on the agency's TikTok page. Hawkins said she films videos quickly, and a lot of the agency's TikToks are done in one take.

A variety of officers and other staff can be seen in both comedic and content-based videos. The account **features K-9 officers**, dancing, COVID-19 tips, public safety announcements and more.

The most viewed video to date features an officer lip-syncing to Celine Dion's "It's All Coming Back To Me Now" while the lights of a police car shine in the background and someone off camera points a leaf blower at her. This video has been viewed about 42.8 million times.

The benefits

Having a strong social media presence is paying off, according to Hawkins. She said the goal is to diminish the stigma surrounding policing.

"That's our big push: to be more approachable and part of the community," she said. "This is an easy medium for filming a really quick, short video that a lot of people can see. We reach a lot of younger people as well."

Not everyone is on board with a police agency filming comedic videos on an app designed for Generation Z. Hawkins said she's heard the critics who say the agency is wasting tax payers' dollars. However, she says the benefits of APD's social media philosophy are showing.

"Because we have a strong following, a lot of people really come out when we do have some kind of instance where we need somebody's (help)," she said.

Just last week, on March 7, Albany police posted on its Facebook page about a missing 10-year-old boy in Albany. Hawkins said within the first three hours of posting about the missing child, the Facebook post was shared 3,600 times.

Taking a chance

Starting a TikTok account could have gone nowhere for APD. Fortunately, it seems like taking a chance has paid off for the agency.

“It was just kind of a leap of faith and it ended up really working out for us,” Hawkins said.

TikTok is a way for the APD to reach out to a younger audience. But it’s also a way for officers and other staff to have a little fun amid a very serious job.

“This job can be very heavy,” Hawkins said. “There’s a lot of horrible things out there and a lot of bad things we see and hear. Humor is a great outlet.”

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