

Little to 'like' about city's social media inconsistency

HIGHLIGHTS

Observer report questions why offensive social media posts from Fire Department personnel didn't result in firings

Fire Department investigator Crystal Eschert was fired for tamer Facebook posts in 2014



THE OBSERVER EDITORIAL BOARD

When the city of Charlotte fired Fire Department investigator Crystal Eschert in late 2014 for a pair of inflammatory Facebook posts, this editorial board suspected she was actually being punished for earlier concerns she raised about the safety of a CFD building on North Graham Street.

At the least, we thought the city seemed to be setting a low bar for what kind of social media post could get employees fired. Would one-time poor choices result in termination when they should result in a severe but lesser punishment?

As it turns out, no. That's a standard that seemed to apply only to Eschert.

The Observer's Steve Harrison reported Monday that since Eschert's firing, at least six other city employees have faced accusations that they made inflammatory social media posts. Some had warning letters placed in their files, while others were given verbal warnings, according to Charlotte City Council member Claire Fallon. Unlike Eschert, none of the employees was fired.

Replay

A reminder: In her Facebook posts, Eschert questioned whether the White House or civil rights advocates would have spoken up if the victim in the 2014 Ferguson, Mo., police shooting were white. “If you’re a thug and worthless to society, it’s not race – You’re just a waste no matter what religion, race or sex you are!” she wrote.

No, those aren’t the kind of controversial comments city employees should be making, especially in a department that directly serves black communities in Charlotte.

But the posts that allegedly came from other firefighters were even more distasteful. One showed a photo of pregnant young black women and called them the “Real Housewives of Section 8.” Another showed the corpse of Daquan Westbrook, who was shot and killed last year by police at Northlake Mall, and called him a “Black Lives Matter Thug.”

Why weren’t these employees fired? The city declined to answer questions about the issue, perhaps in part because it’s fighting a lawsuit from Eschert about her firing.

Another question: In light of the new revelations, is the city taking a closer look at what kind of people it’s hiring? While the new allegations involve only six Fire Department employees, it’s enough of a pattern that minorities might wonder whether they’ll always be treated equitably by the Fire Department or the city overall.

This much we do know: While an independent investigation last year into Eschert’s firing found no “direct” evidence she was terminated for being a whistleblower, it did reveal an alarming culture of mistrust at the Fire Department. Rank-and-file personnel believed their bosses would retaliate if they felt wronged, the report said.

It looks that way even moreso now.

As we’ve said before in this space, Eschert’s offensive posts merited only a suspension and some sensitivity training. The city should admit it was wrong and settle her lawsuit, and it should craft a transparent approach to social media that employees and the public can understand. Then it should follow that policy, consistently this time.



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