

Body-Worn Cameras

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri, changing the law enforcement community forever. This tragic event catapulted two issues into the national spotlight: police use of force and the need for police department transparency. The call from police reformers and activists for law enforcement officers to wear body-worn cameras rapidly accelerated. Since then, law enforcement agencies across the country have begun the daunting task of purchasing body-worn cameras for their officers. For police departments that have not yet committed to a camera system, there are several items to consider before making a selection.

Research

Agencies should develop a committee that comprises department personnel of different ranks. Patrol officers and first line supervisors should be wearing and operating the camera system. Allowing officers to have input in the various aspects and stages of selecting and implementing a body-worn program will create buy-in and help mitigate any related problems after deployment of the camera system.

Additionally, agency heads may want to consider involving community leaders and other influential stakeholders within the community. Understanding and discussing their expectations for the camera system will provide an opportunity to dispel rumors and myths associated with body-worn cameras. It will also provide an opportunity to redefine expectations that may be unrealistic.

Cost

Police Departments need to determine their upfront and ongoing budget for a body-worn camera program. Before body-worn cameras, police organizations primarily used in-car cameras. The cost associated with in-car cameras is heavier on the front end when purchasing the system. After installation, the cost to maintain the unit and store footage is nominal. Conversely, the cost associated with body-worn cameras is lower on the front end. The initial purchase of the hardware is relatively inexpensive compared to the cost of storing, retrieving and potentially redacting the vast amount of footage the camera captures.

As part of the cost analysis, agencies should decide how they will store camera footage. Agencies can either utilize a server storage system or a cloud storage system. A server storage system is kept in-house, whether at the police department itself or another appropriate department within the municipality. Agencies can increase their server storage capabilities in a single budget year instead of incurring annual expenses with cloud storage. However, it is not uncommon for municipalities to hire an additional full-time employee to manage the storage system along with any/all internal and external footage requests for stored footage. If hiring an additional employee is not within the budget, agencies will need to have provisions in place for a current employee to dedicate a considerable amount of time managing the program.

Also, agencies should consider the number of units they may need to purchase carefully, accounting for all persons that could potentially be wearing a camera. For instance, an agency may want to consider purchasing cameras for its detectives if the detectives have the option of working an “off-duty” security job in a standard patrol uniform or filling in on patrol when needed. Additionally, agencies should consider purchasing replacement cameras in the event a camera is taken out-of-service for repair.

Purchase

After Ferguson, numerous body-worn camera products began appearing on the market for purchase. To help review these product options and find the right product to fit their specific needs, agencies may want to perform beta tests. Committee members and proactive officers should be chosen to test the system. During the beta tests, officers will be able to measure the functionality and operability of the product.

During beta tests, officers can consider ways to best mount and position the camera on the body. The placement and angle of the camera are paramount in gathering sufficient footage for documentation. For instance, a camera mounted on an officer's chest may not adequately capture a use of force incident such as an officer pointing a gun or conducted energy device at an individual. Purchasing a camera that provides multiple mounting points for the camera may prove necessary. Agencies may also want to research the history of the manufacturer, particularly if it is not well established in the business. The financial stability of a company may affect its ability to honor the warranty and replacement of malfunctioning parts.

As more events are recorded, departments may experience increasing demands for footage and may need to respond to more requests for single videos or large blocks of video. Agencies should consider the sharing capabilities of a camera system, including file compression and footage sharing options.

Review the various video recording options offered by a camera system, including resolution and audio capabilities. For instance, carefully consider using a camera that provides enhanced video, particularly in low light conditions. Video footage that delivers improved clarity from what the officer can see with the naked eye may cause those reviewing the video to question why the officer chose a particular force option or course of action. Similarly, audio playback may help to understand an officer's response to a situation and might be critical in supporting an officer's chosen course of action.

Policy Considerations

Before implementing body-worn cameras, an agency should have a policy in place. In drafting and adopting a policy, an agency should consider:

- Public information laws
- What to record (when to activate/deactivate)
- Retention schedules for various incidents
- Disciplinary actions for failing to activate a camera
- Juvenile interactions
- When to release recorded video (public record versus private record)
- Public notification- Are officers required to notify an individual when he/she is being recorded?
- Restrictions on recording (hospitals, bathrooms, expectation of privacy)
- Video playback- Will officers be allowed to review footage before writing reports or giving statements?
- What to do if evidence of a crime is recorded (discovery)



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Things to Remember

Many agencies purchase body-worn cameras thinking this will solve all of their problems regarding the issues raised in Ferguson. To a certain extent, this may be true. However, there are additional items that need to be taken into consideration, particularly when viewing camera footage, such as:

- Recording speed versus actual event may vary
- Camera may see better than your officers
- Most likely not going to view from officers perspective
- Video may be irregular, unstable and difficult to see clearly



Additional Resources

Although the process of implementing a body-worn camera program may be complicated and time-consuming, the benefits are numerous and worthwhile. Agencies across the country routinely report the use of body-worn cameras has improved citizen and officer behavior, expedited the resolution of citizen complaints, increased transparency, improved evidence for a prosecution, and enhanced training of officers. As your agency begins looking for a body worn camera system, the following links may prove useful:

Bureau of Justice Assistance | Body-Worn Camera Toolkit

<https://www.bja.gov/bwc/>

Body-Worn Camera Training & Technology | BWC Policy Review Scorecard

<http://www.bwctta.com/resources/bwc-resources/body-worn-camera-policy-review-scorecard>

Body-Worn Camera Training & Technology | Home Page

<http://www.bwctta.com/>

Global Justice Information Sharing Initiative | Video Evidence: A Law Enforcement Guide to Resources and Best Practices

https://www.bja.gov/bwc/pdfs/Video-Evidence_LE-Guide-to-Resources-and-Best-Practices.pdf

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