

Primer on Body-Worn Cameras for Law Enforcement

It's a scenario all too familiar to many law enforcement officers: A routine traffic stop. A later claim of harassment by the driver. This time, though, it doesn't degenerate into a messy round of "he said, she said." The officer's body-worn camera recorded the entire incident and proves no harassment took place.

According to *A Primer on Body-Worn Cameras for Law Enforcement*, a pending publication produced by the Sensor, Surveillance and Biometric Technologies Center of Excellence (SSBT CoE), body-worn cameras (BWCs) can play an important role as an officer's technological partner, faithfully capturing what the officer sees and hears. Attached to items such as helmets, glasses or badges, or riding snugly in a shirt pocket, they can provide valuable evidence in situations related to emergency response, self-initiated public contacts and routine patrol. However, a lack of technical recommendations and implementation guidance may leave agencies confused about their use and their usefulness, says Dr. Lars Ericson, SSBT CoE director.

The Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Sensors and Surveillance Technology Working Group has identified this lack of both a technical standard and guidance on standard operating procedures as a high-priority need. Development of the primer by the SSBT CoE, which is part of NIJ's National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System, is a first step in addressing those concerns, Ericson says.

"As with many new technologies, the technology is out in front of policy and protocols. Agencies need sample procedures and information on how to best use them," he says.

The primer addresses issues such as management and storage of evidence and records, implications for the court system and the need for training. It covers BWC types, reasons for adopting the technology, and implementation issues, and includes a listing of reference materials and the results of a market survey. Much of the information for the survey was gleaned from one-on-one contacts at both of the 2011 NIJ Technology Institutes for Law Enforcement and the 2011 NIJ Rural Law Enforcement Technology Institute, in addition to conferences

such as the Technologies for Critical Incident Preparedness Conference.

Jonathan Hayes, lead engineer at the SSBT CoE, obtained several sample cameras and used them to help solicit information from practitioners at these and other events, and in the process learned a valuable lesson himself.

"In our research, we obtained three units. Two of the units were roughly equivalent in cost but were drastically different with respect to features and specifications, as well as the overall quality of the product," Hayes says. "The third unit was the approximate cost of the two other units combined. This unit was robust in features and specifications for the price, but is likely out of budgetary range of many departments. This drove home the point that doing proper research first will reap great benefits in the long run. Departments should contact vendors and ask for loaner units to try to find the best fit."

"Without doing that kind of research, a department could potentially buy units that they end up shelving," Ericson adds. "In these times of tight budgets, no one has the luxury of spending money on something they can't use. We knew we couldn't provide all the answers, but we want to help them make sure they consider all the logistical and operational impacts as well as the benefits BWCs can provide.

Agencies can then develop better informed policies and procedures. We don't want to see any department hitting those kinds of pitfalls with budgets the way they are."

And agencies should plan to develop those policies and procedures first, Hayes says.

"Although the tendency is to buy something and try it out first, they should start with an in-depth effort to lay out how officers are going to use BWCs, how and when to upload data, and other key operational factors," Hayes says. "If they don't completely and thoroughly think about it first, they may create more work for themselves in the end."

Police departments such as those in Granville, W. Va., and Trophy Club, Texas, contributed information to the

project on their own experiences implementing BWCs, providing lessons learned and helping other agencies know which issues to address to avoid those pitfalls and extra work. The CoE also benefits from the expertise of its operational law enforcement subject matter expert, Dr. Jack Fuller, a law enforcement professional with more than 35 years of experience with the U.S. Customs Service who is currently a counter-terrorism lead for the Joint Task Force North based in El Paso, Texas.

For more information on the research involved in developing A Primer on Body-Worn Cameras for Law Enforcement, contact Dr. Lars Ericson at the Sensor, Surveillance and Biometric Technologies Center of Excellence at (304) 368-4216 or lars.ericson@mantech.com. For information on the National Institute of Justice's Sensor, Surveillance and Biometric Technologies portfolio, contact Program Manager Mark Greene at (202) 307-3384 or mark.greene2@usdoj.gov.



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