

BODY CAMS FOR SPPD

This project was the original project that would frame our approach, sources, and methods to bring about meaningful and lasting change.

Objective:

To get a police force that is well paid, well trained, and well monitored. We wanted the St Pete Police Department Chief to adopt a bodycam system that is always on when interacting with the public. The bodycam records should be readily available for review by the public. The bodycam records should be subject to retention just as any public record, with exception made due to storage limitation.

Obstacle:

Many high and low ranking SPPD officers, including the Chief, were against the idea of video supervision. Influential members of the city were also against the idea. Video evidence would eliminate favoritism in the way SPPD charges our citizens for alleged crimes. The mayor at the time was hands off and turned the decision over to the Chief. The chief was making all kinds of excuses about why bodycam was not feasible. IT brought up: storage cost and privacy as major concerns. The truth is the fear of change and the possibility of increased lawsuits due to abuse were his main concerns.

Approach:

Since the mayor gave his power away from deciding on the matter, the Chief of police and City Council members were our targets. In the mayor's defense he had black faith leaders in his administration telling him to trust the Chief. A decision the mayor would soon find out was totally political and made to deny him a major win in the favor of the upcoming black mayor: Ken Welch. We also targeted the public to bring awareness of the issue. Just like us, a major slew of the public was unaware of SPPD officers' lack of video supervision. To target the public, we use Facebook and Instagram posts. We created convincing adds on these platforms that targeted St Pete residents. Our posts and adds stir online debates and expose a major flaw in our police system. The word of a police officer about an incident is absolute. The police officer was free to lie, exaggerate, and deceive the justice system. Our online presence also attracted good police officers that wanted the video presence to protect themselves from false claims of abuse. Some even admit it would stop the rich and powerful from getting away with alleged crimes and allow them to pursue charges armed with video evidence. Some politicians started calling us keyboard warriors and our movement was irrelevant to city policies.

We considered their criticisms about our current aggressive online approach and took them to the streets. We were in Saturday Markets passing out free gifts while conversing with the public. We posted our yard signs north of the city, it was redundant to post them on the south side. They already know the need for bodycam. We also got a spot in the MLK parade and march proudly passing out beads and bag of goodies while demanding bodycam for our police officers. One thing was clear at this point; we were not going away. To make matters even more interesting it was an election year and the mayorship was at play. We attended every debate between the city council candidates and the mayoral candidates. We advocated for a bodycam system while interacting with the candidates. We made bodycam a major political issue. Our organization is apolitical, every candidate regardless of party affiliation was a potential align. We skipped Ken Welch just as we did not advocate south of the city. He should know the need for video supervision from a black man's perspective. By the time the election came around, the tides were turned in favor of bodycam. The new mayor made the decision for SPPD to adapt a suitable bodycam system. We won, now what?

Conclusion:

We won; we made a difference. Our advocacy gave us some meaningful accolades but also made us an enemy of SPPD. We had concerns of future retaliation and excessive prosecution if we ever found ourselves in the position of a SPPD officer having to make a judgment call on cooperability. Life has taught us that there is a price to pay when you speak against abuse in the system. We decided to continue our advocacy and expanded our reach to abuses at City Hall.