Lowell to put body cameras on officers

Fatal shooting of unarmed 18-year-old by officer in Ferguson prompts move

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Lowell plans to equip all of its street police officers with body cameras by the end of next month, while some other police departments in the state continue to discuss the idea.

Lowell Police Chief Randy Harvey said the cameras will help keep the public and officers safer.

"It not only reduces complaints against officers but it helps us if we do have a complaint," Harvey said. "We can find out what happened."

The Lowell City Council approved $21,000 for the purchase of 14 cameras and 14 chargers. The cost of 14 cameras will be covered by grants from J.B. Hunt Transport Services Inc., which is its headquarters in Lowell, and Firehouse Subs, Harvey said.

The cameras are small and can be clipped to an officer's shirt, Harvey said. The camera's data is automatically downloaded to a server when an officer plugs it in to charge. The department will pay a $3,000 fee annually to a company for data storage.

"I had been thinking about it for a few years. After the situation in Ferguson I decided to pursue it more," said Harvey, referring to the fatal shooting of an unarmed, 18-year-old Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., in August.

Police in the St. Louis suburb did not wear body cameras until after Brown's shooting, according to The Associated Press. The death set off protests about the use of police force that have continued for months.

Many police departments across the state and country began considering body cameras after the Ferguson killing, said Montie Sims, president of the Arkansas Association of Chiefs of Police.

About a month after Brown's shooting, the Jonesboro Police Department announced it would soon wear body cameras. The Craighead County city received a $12,000 U.S. Department of Justice grant. The Jacksonville, Ward, Beebe, Greenwood and Austin police departments have also expressed interest.

The Police Department has dashboard cameras mounted in police vehicles, Foster said. Those cameras record incidents in public settings. But a body camera could record images in private settings such as homes. He said it could also record private information including child abuse and domestic battery.

In addition, handling requests for video recordings under the Freedom of Information Act could be costly, Foster said. That could include new software programs and personnel to blur the faces of youths or victims, he said.

"I think we really need courts and legislatures to work on the details before we would feel comfortable with that," Foster said.

Washington County Sheriff Tim Helder said there was some concern about Freedom of Information Act requests. Data released to the public could cause problems with investigations, he said.

"The mic is always on, so to speak," Helder said. "But I don't think that needs to be at the forefront of our concerns. It is about officer safety and the safety of citizens."

All Washington County supervisors have cameras in their vehicles. There are times when audio is recorded from the dashboard, but actions are out of view.

"We have incidents where officers get out of range of the video on the car," Helder said. "We don't actually get to see the actual event. We can't prove or disprove it."

A body camera would help solve that problem, he said.

The sheriff's office has tested cameras and is looking for a camera that is compatible with its current data storage system, Helder said.

Sims said finding the right equipment has been a challenge for some departments. There are more than 10 companies selling body-camera equipment, he said.

The Fayetteville and Bentonville departments both are looking for camera systems that would work for them.