

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 body cameras and radios. The cost of 14 cameras will be covered by grants from J.B. Hunt Transport Services Inc., which has its headquarters in Lowell, and Firehouse Subs, Harvey said.

The cameras are small and can be clipped to an officer's shirt or glasses, 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 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 its officers would soon wear body cameras after the Craighead County city received a \$12,000 U.S. Department of Justice grant. The Jacksonville, Ward, Beebe, Glenwood and Austin police departments also are

the other Arkansas law enforcement agencies that have equipped certain officers with body cameras in recent years.

The Little Rock and North Little Rock departments have said they are researching equipping their officers with wearable cameras. The Washington County sheriff's office plans to have its deputies wearing body cameras by the end of this year. Bentonville and Fayetteville police departments are testing cameras, and the Benton County sheriff's office plans to buy cameras when funds are available. Springdale has said its department is starting discussions about cameras.

Sims also is the chief of police in Dardanelle, where officers have been using body cameras for about two years.

"It is a very good effective tool both for protection of the officer and protection of the public," Sims said. "We are humans and we make mistakes and if that were to occur it would show that."

A 2013 study conducted by the Police Foundation found the rate of use of force per 1,000 contacts with the public was reduced by 2.5 times when the Rialto, Calif., Police Department used body cameras. Complaints from the public about use of force also decreased from 28 to three during a 12-month period, the study showed.

"We have found them very useful when officers had to use some type of physical force," Sims said. "It always has supported the officer's training and professionalism. In fact, it has showed that officers have handled situations correctly."

The cameras, which record while officers are at a crime scene, also have helped with investigations, Sims said.

"He is recording future evidence that can be used to solve that crime," Sims said.

Not every department in the state is sold on the idea of body cameras. Keith Foster, spokesman for the Rogers Police Department, said the department has decided to not pursue cameras.

"We feel there are still too many concerns and unknowns surrounding their use," Foster

public and police need to be ironed out prior to the significant investment of taxpayer dollars into a system that is yet unproven."

The Police Department has dashboard cameras mounted in officers' 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 situations 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 using 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 them," Foster said.

Washington County Sheriff Tim Helder said there is some concern about Freedom of Information 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 street deputies 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

already use. Bentonville police Capt. John Hubbard said his department has located a system that officers have found to be more efficient than others.

"It does a very, very good job for us," Hubbard said. "If you compare our last in-car system, it was not very user friendly. It took a lot of man hours to get videos ready for court. This system has very easy search options."

Hubbard said the department is testing some camera models. However, the department also is waiting to see if the company that makes its dashboard cameras comes out with a body camera of its own.

Benton County Sheriff Kelley Craddock said he supports the use of body cameras, but funding for the cameras is a concern. Benton County would have to cut its budget somewhere else to purchase the cameras, he said.

"If we do use them it will be something that we will have to ask for in a budget next year," Craddock said. "We are right now trying to work on overcrowding in the jails and making sure that hot meals are served."

The office also must ensure that it spends taxpayer dollars on the right equipment, Craddock said. The equipment is new and changing, he said. If the office waits, some problems could be worked out.

Ruby Smith, a Springdale resident, said she sees advantages and disadvantages for police having body cameras.

"A lot of things that have happened lately could have been cleared up if they had cameras," Smith said. "There is also a chance of misinterpretation of what happened even with a camera."

Smith said she wouldn't be concerned about a camera filming her if she spoke with an officer.

Bobby Logue of Springdale also said he wouldn't be concerned about officers wearing body cameras.

"I'm not planning on getting pulled over," Logue said. "I haven't been stopped in years."

Information for this article was contributed by staff members of