Fayetteville to push for body cameras
City’s police expect to place recording devices on all officers by end of year

STACY KIBYRN
NWGA DEMOCRAT- gazette

FAYETTEVILLE — Body cameras help police write reports, confirm account of events, verify how an encounter with the public went and improve community relations, according to local and state agencies.

Fayetteville soon will join a growing list of cities with police departments adding them to their toolkit.

The City Council on Tuesday approved a $705,680 contract with Axon Enterprises, formerly Taser International, in Tucson, Ariz., for 129 body-worn cameras, associated equipment and 90 stun guns. The item is on the consent agenda, meaning council members should pass it without discussion.

Deputy Chief Mike Reynolds said he expects to have all 129 sworn personnel equipped with cameras by December. The contract covers five years and includes two upgrades.

The contract will be paid for with a combination of federal funds, money from the city Capital Improvements budget, and police impact fees, which are tacked onto new building developments.

The Police Department has tested a handful of the devices for the past few months. Cpl. Stephen Mauk said the cameras clip easily to a magnet in the center of the uniform. The department allows officers to charge the cameras and upload video to a server simultaneously. Plus, they make writing reports a lot easier, he said.

After working patrol for 12 years, the biggest change for Mauk is remembering to tap the camera to turn it on.

“I think it’s a great tool,” he said. “I’m sold on it.”

TAKING A PASS

Last year, Fayetteville, Springdale and Washington County applied for a matching grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to start a body camera program. The three agencies got approval for a combined $186,496 in federal money.

Fayetteville was awarded $62,680, Springdale got $73,696 and Washington County was approved for $45,120.

The Fayetteville City Council in December approved matching $24,000 of the grant. They’ve since used some of that money to pay for additional cameras.

Fayetteville, Springdale and county have all had complaints about the lack of cameras.

Foster said. “Again, we are not saying we will never adopt this technology; we just need to have our concerns addressed.”

LOWELL USES THE SAME ONLINE STORAGE SERVICE, Axon’s Evidence.com, that Fayetteville does. The software that comes with it makes things like blurring faces simple, Harvey said.

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, police started wearing body-worn cameras in late 2015. Aside from the complaints about malfunction, officers haven’t had any complaints, Capt. Gary Crain said.

“I’ve been in law enforcement long enough that I was an officer when video cameras didn’t go into vehicles,” he said. “Some people liked them and some people were opposed, but they turned out to be very useful. With these body cameras, it’s the same thing.”

Every department is different as far as personnel, resources and money, but a 2016 Argus Democrat-Gazette report identified at least 37 agencies that had them, or about one in eight agencies.

Arkansas has 75 sheriff’s offices and, according to the most recent available data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 262 local law enforcement agencies.

The report encourages police departments to get body cameras for their officers when feasible. Sipes said having the footage in an officer-involved shooting, for example, can prove invaluable in showing the appropriateness of the officer’s actions.

On the flip side, the cameras have a lofty price tag. The rules on when to turn the cameras on or off are murky at best, and how long records should be kept differs with each agency depending on resources.

A department such as Fayetteville’s can use impact fees and capital money for body cameras, but that’s not going to be the case for everyone, he said.

“So many agencies right now budgetarily are strapped,” Sipes said. “If it becomes state-mandated, they would have to come up with some assistance, some how — grants, or something — to help these smaller agencies that just couldn’t afford them.”

LOWELL USES THE SAME ONLINE STORAGE SERVICE, Axon’s Evidence.com, that Fayetteville does. The software that comes with it makes things like blurring faces simple, Harvey said.

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, police started wearing body-worn cameras in late 2015. Aside from the complaints about malfunction, officers haven’t had any complaints, Capt. Gary Crain said.

“I’ve been in law enforcement long enough that I was an officer when video cameras didn’t go into vehicles,” he said. “Some people liked them and some people were opposed, but they turned out to be very useful. With these body cameras, it’s the same thing.”

Every department is different as far as personnel, resources and money, but a 2016 Argus Democrat-Gazette report identified at least 37 agencies that had them, or about one in eight agencies.

Arkansas has 75 sheriff’s offices and, according to the most recent available data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 262 local law enforcement agencies.

The report encourages police departments to get body cameras for their officers when feasible. Sipes said having the footage in an officer-involved shooting, for example, can prove invaluable in showing the appropriateness of the officer’s actions.

On the flip side, the cameras have a lofty price tag. The rules on when to turn the cameras on or off are murky at best, and how long records should be kept differs with each agency depending on resources.

A department such as Fayetteville’s can use impact fees and capital money for body cameras, but that’s not going to be the case for everyone, he said.

“So many agencies right now budgetarily are strapped,” Sipes said. “If it becomes state-mandated, they would have to come up with some assistance, some how — grants, or something — to help these smaller agencies that just couldn’t afford them.”

TRAILBLAZERS

The Lowell Police Department in late 2015 became one of the earliest agencies in Arkansas to get body cameras for all its officers.

J.B. Hunt and Firehouse Subs picked up the $21,000 tab. Uppies said the video cameras are up to the city, but it’s been worth it, Chief Randy Harvey said.

Lowell police wear their cameras on a ball cap, glasses or laps. It helps an officer out when they do a report. They can just pull the video up and refresh their memory on what happened.

“Again, we are not saying we will never adopt this technology; we just need to have our concerns addressed.”