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Implementing a Body-Worn Camera Program: Recommendations and Lessons Learned



Over the past year, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), with support from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing (COPS Office), researched the use of body-worn cameras in police agencies. PERF interviewed more than 40 police executives who have experience with body-worn cameras, reviewed more than 20 body-worn camera policies submitted by police agencies, and hosted a one-day conference in Washington, D.C., where more than 200 police chiefs, sheriffs, scholars, federal justice officials, and other experts discussed their experiences with body-worn cameras.

Drawing from this research, PERF and the COPS Office developed *Implementing a Body-Worn Camera Program: Recommendations and Lessons Learned*, which provides guidance to law enforcement agencies on the use of body-worn cameras. This publication

discusses the perceived benefits of body-worn cameras and the considerations that must be addressed. It also provides comprehensive policy recommendations that reflect promising practices and lessons learned.

Perceived benefits of body-worn cameras

Among police executives whose departments use body-worn cameras, there is an overall perception that the cameras are a useful tool. These reported benefits include the following:

- **Strengthening police accountability** by documenting incidents and encounters between officers and the public
- **Preventing confrontational situations** by improving officer professionalism and the behavior of people being recorded
- **Resolving officer-involved incidents and complaints** by providing a more accurate record of events
- **Improving agency transparency** by allowing the public to see video evidence of police activities and encounters
- **Identifying and correcting internal agency problems** by revealing officers who engage in misconduct and agency-wide problems
- **Strengthening officer performance** by using footage for officer training and monitoring

- **Improving evidence documentation** for investigations and prosecutions

Policy considerations and recommendations

Agencies should develop comprehensive written policies prior to implementing a body-worn camera program. Policies should be specific enough to provide clear and consistent guidance yet allow room for flexibility as the program evolves. When developing policies, it is useful to consult with supervisors and frontline officers, legal advisors, police unions, prosecutors, and the community. Agencies should make the policies available to the public.



Body-worn cameras raise a number of considerations that agencies must take into account as they craft their policies. These include the effects that cameras have on privacy and community relationships, concerns raised by frontline officers, expectations that cameras create, and financial costs.

The following is a partial list of policy recommendations based on research conducted by PERF and the COPS Office.¹ Agencies should adapt these recommendations to fit their own needs, resources, legal requirements, and philosophical approach.

- **With limited exceptions, officers should be required to activate their body-worn cameras when responding to all calls for service and during all law enforcement-related encounters and activities that occur while the officer is on duty.** Policies should clearly define what is included in this requirement (e.g., traffic stops, arrests, searches, interrogations, pursuits). When in doubt, officers should record. Many agencies provide exceptions for situations in which recording is unsafe, impossible, or impractical but require officers to articulate in writing or on camera their reasons for not recording.
- **Officers should be required to obtain consent prior to recording interviews with crime victims.** This addresses the significant privacy concerns associated with videotaping crime victims.
- **Officers should have the discretion to keep their cameras turned off during conversations with crime witnesses and members of the community who wish to discuss criminal activity in their neighborhood.** Some witnesses and community members may be hesitant to come forward if they know they will be recorded. This can undermine community policing and intelligence-gathering efforts. Due to the evidentiary value of these statements, officer should make every attempt to record unless the person is unwilling to speak on camera. In some cases, victims or witnesses may agree to only an audio recording, so an officer may agree to point the camera away from the person and record audio only.
- **Officers should be required to articulate on camera or in writing their reasoning if they fail to record an activity that is required by department policy to be recorded.** This holds officers accountable and helps supervisors investigate irregularities. It is also increasingly common for courts and review boards to expect video recordings, so documenting the absence of a video can help alleviate concerns about the officer's credibility.
- **Policies should include specific measures to prevent data tampering, deleting, and copying.** It is critical to protect the integrity and security of video footage. Common strategies include: using data storage systems with built-in audit trails, requiring supervisors to download footage of an incident in which the officer was involved, and conducting forensic reviews.
- **Policies should specifically state the length of time that recorded data must be retained.** Officers should categorize footage according to the type of event recorded. Retention times for evidentiary footage are typically governed by state evidentiary laws and regulations. For non-evidentiary data,

agencies should consider the need to preserve footage to promote transparency and investigate complaints, the state's public disclosure laws, data storage capacity, and departmental policies governing other types of electronic records. Most agencies PERF consulted retain non-evidentiary data for 60 to 90 days.

- **Officers should be permitted to review video footage of an incident in which they were involved prior to making a statement about the incident.** Reviewing footage aids officer recollection and leads to more accurate documentation of events. Real-time recording is considered best evidence and is unaffected by stress or other factors. Most police executives PERF consulted favor allowing review in these circumstances.
- **Written policies should clearly describe the circumstances in which supervisors will be authorized to review an officer's body-worn camera footage.** PERF recommends that supervisors review footage to investigate complaints and specific incidents, to identify training videos, and to review the activities of officers who are in a probationary period or who have a pattern of abuse allegations. The agency's internal audit unit, rather than an officer's direct supervisor, should conduct random reviews of footage to monitor compliance and assess performance. This policy will help avoid undermining the trust between an officer and supervisor.
- **Agencies should have clear and consistent protocols for releasing recorded data externally to the public and the news media.** Each agency's policy must comply with the state's public disclosure laws. PERF generally recommends a broad disclosure policy to promote agency transparency and accountability. However, agencies must always take into account privacy considerations when determining whether to release footage. Policies should include specific measures for preventing unauthorized video access or release.
- **Body-worn camera training should be required for all agency personnel who may use or otherwise be involved with body-worn cameras.** This includes supervisors whose officers wear cameras, records management personnel, training personnel, Internal Affairs, etc. Training should be ongoing and include an overview of relevant laws, procedures for operating the equipment safely and effectively, scenario-based exercises, data management procedures, and how to present video evidence in court.
- **Agencies should collect statistical data concerning body-worn camera usage.** Collecting and releasing this data helps promote transparency and allows agencies to evaluate program effectiveness. Agencies should conduct periodic reviews of body-worn camera policies and protocols.

The COPS Office Resource Center has [Implementing a Body-Worn Camera Program](#) available for order or download.

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References

¹ *The complete list of recommendations is found in [Implementing a Body-Worn Camera Program: Recommendations and Lessons Learned](#).*

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