



Florida police department to begin using body-mounted cameras

By William Patrick
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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Sarasota police officers will begin wearing body-mounted cameras later this year in an effort to increase police transparency.

That's a topic of heightened national interest in the wake of the Ferguson, Mo., police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager.

But rather than resist the accountability measure, the Sarasota Police Department is the initiative's chief proponent.

"It's a modern and professional use of technology to modify people's behaviors, both the police officer and the citizen," Sarasota Police Chief Bernadette DiPino said in an email.

"These cameras will give a look from a police officer's perspective and we will be able to capture information and it will be able to help us with training, it will help us make sure our police officers are doing what they're supposed to be doing and also make sure the citizens' actions are captured to help for use in evidence later," DiPino added.

The Sarasota City Commission concurred and voted unanimously Monday to accept a U.S. Department of Justice grant providing \$36,645 in initial funding for the cameras.

Before the vote, however, the item was pulled from the agenda for further clarification.

"There's a lot going on in the country right now," said Vice-Mayor Susan Chapman in reference to protests and clashes with police in Ferguson.

With growing concerns over the militarization of local police forces at a fever pitch, it's unclear whether body-mounted cameras, also worn by American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, will add to authoritarian impressions of police.

Trevor Burrus, research fellow for the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies, calls them "essential."

“I’m not sure why they aren’t being used more,” Burrus said. “They would eliminate many he said, he said disputes with police by providing a record.”

John Whitehead, a constitutional attorney for the Virginia-based Rutherford Institute, believes law enforcement body cameras are inevitable but is concerned about the potential for abuse.

“It may reduce some violence, but they are another way law enforcement is watching us,” Whitehead said in an interview. “We shouldn’t have to live in a society where citizens expect to be recorded by police.”

On that point, DiPino told the city commission, “Cameras are not anything new.”

“We actually have cameras in police cars. There are cameras on roadways. We have red light camera poles and highways have them as well. So when people talk about their privacy being violated, you’re on camera now, you might as well consider yourself on camera. Citizens all have cameras in their cell phones and they are constantly recording what a police officer does but they’re not capturing the whole entire incident,” DiPino told Watchdog.

The American Civil Liberties Union, no fan of police surveillance, stakes out its own position: On-body cameras are different because of their potential to serve as a check against the abuse of power by police officers.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund asserts body-mounted cameras could help combat police violence, and recommended them in a letter Thursday to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, the nation’s top law enforcement officer.

DiPino insists the Sarasota body-camera initiative is not a response to the violence and civil unrest in Ferguson, which continued as of Monday night. SPD first raised the idea in January.

The department will join the Daytona Beach, Sanford and Windermere police departments as the only ones of roughly 140 in the state to use them.

“We’ve seen, in other jurisdictions, a reduction in injuries to police officers because of the cameras and even during our initial testing of this camera system, we had one case if not two, where an officer was accused of excessive force but by having the digital evidence we were able to exonerate those officers and found that the person lied. No excessive force was used in the case,” DiPino told Watchdog.

In Rialto, Calif., body cameras are credited with a reduction in the use of police force by 60 percent in their first year of use. Citizen complaints against police declined 88 percent, according to the Wall Street Journal.

The cost per camera in Sarasota is about \$500, along with another \$200 for camera kits, according to SPD. Additional costs for docking stations, licenses for video downloads and memory to store video have yet to be determined.

“Eventually we may use forfeiture funds in the future,” said an SPD spokesperson in an email, referring to the practice of seizing private assets, including cash, linked to crimes.

The data would likely be kept for 90 days unless it’s considered evidence. Additional guidance from the state attorney general is expected, according to SPD.

The cameras, Axon Flex models, will be purchased from a tech company called Taser, which also offers a digital evidence management system.

“The biggest cost is not cameras, but data storage,” DiPino told the city commission.

All told, those costs may pale in comparison to those incurred by families, communities and police officers all affected by violence.

Still, there are no guarantees. Even with the increased transparency and accountability that comes with the technology, Ferguson police had at least two body cameras and two vehicle dashboard cameras at the time of the Michael Brown shooting.

A city of Ferguson statement issued Tuesday said city officials are exploring funding for more dash and vest cameras.