



Make body cams mandatory to improve accountability

Bryant Jackson-Green

January 15, 2016

An objective video recording of police activity and incidents – through body cameras – can ensure accountability and an honest way to evaluate problems as they arise, protecting the public and police alike. As the public and government officials grapple with the Laquan McDonald shooting and the alleged mishandling of the case by Chicago city officials, many are asking what reforms can help prevent something similar from happening again. Increased transparency, changes to police union rules and other structural reforms are certainly needed. So is the use of body cameras.

If there was any doubt before, most of the country now recognizes just how critical video recordings can be. A recent poll from the Cato Institute shows that 92 percent of Americans now support the adoption of body cameras – including majorities across the political spectrum.

One proposal before Illinois lawmakers this year would mandate any city with a million or more residents – meaning just Chicago – to require all police officers to wear body cameras. The city announced plans in November to expand its current body camera program, but to one-third of Chicago rather than the entire city. Gov. Bruce Rauner signed legislation in 2015 that established rules for body camera use throughout the state and provides some funding for the cameras. However, the law does not mandate their use.

But if there's any place where the use of body cameras should be required, it's Chicago. Considering how much taxpayers now spend on the litigation and settlement of police-misconduct cases, residents should support mandatory use of body cameras by police as a cost-saving measure.

Chicago has paid more than half a billion dollars in police settlements, legal fees and associated costs over the last decade, according to a study released by the Better Government Association in 2014. Though body cameras alone do not guarantee a positive outcome in confrontations between police and residents, many incidents might have been avoided if there had been reliable video footage of the events in question. At the very least, an objective record of what occurred would be available.

Here are some examples of payouts from the city of Chicago for police misconduct:

- \$5.3 million for a wrongful-death lawsuit settlement to the family of Cornelius Ware, a paraplegic man whom police fatally shot in 2003

- \$3 million to the family of Michael Pleasance in 2011; Pleasance was unarmed when a police officer killed him at a CTA station
- \$4.1 million to the family of Flint Farmer, who died in 2011 after being shot in the back three times by an officer who thought he had a gun (he turned out to be holding a cell phone)

The advantage of police body cameras to the public is obvious. If worn consistently, they would protect from police abuse anyone who's pulled over, arrested or questioned. One frequently cited study conducted in Rialto, Calif., revealed a 60 percent reduction in the use of force and an 88 percent reduction in complaints against the police in a single year after officers started wearing body cameras. Another study of a body camera program in San Diego showed public complaints dropped by more than 40 percent after the city's police department adopted body cameras.

And cameras would benefit the police just as much as the public. Potential offenders, aware that their words and actions are being captured by cameras, have a strong incentive to avoid rash actions. Moreover, having a recorded account of interactions with suspects would help make police reports more accurate.

Body cameras are a simple step toward saving taxpayer dollars and preventing tragedies on all sides.