

NEWSOK

Arbitrator tells OKC police to shelve body camera use

Graham Lee Brewer

June 14, 2016

Not even six months after the pilot program began, the Oklahoma City Police Department must immediately suspend its use of body cameras, an arbitrator ruled Tuesday.

Arbitrator M. Zane Lumbley sided with the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 123, which represents the vast majority of the city's officers, finding a portion of the department's body camera policy violated the collective bargaining agreement between the city and the union.

At issue is the authority given to supervisors to view an officer's body camera footage at any given time, said John George, president of Lodge 123 and a 25-year veteran of the department. During contract negotiations, both the union and the department agreed the body camera program was a good move, George said, however, the union did not think it was fair to allow an officer's supervisor to randomly view their body camera footage.

“What we're trying to avoid is a supervisor just watching videos trying to find something wrong,” George said. “If that supervisor likes one trooper and not the other, he might watch one's footage more than the other.”

George contends the contract negotiations were not complete, since the disagreement was not resolved, but Chief Bill Citty moved forward anyway. He said many in the department knew that if the program was implemented it would go to arbitration.

“Everybody felt like this was a no-brainer, it has to be negotiated,” he said. “It put us in the position to have to arbitrate something that we're not against.”

In the decision, which is legally binding, Lumbley came to the same conclusion.

“FOP was continuing to negotiate with the (department) when the Chief decided, based on his view of the frequency with which officers' use of authority is questioned as well as recent questions put to the City Council by members of the public as to when the use of cameras would be implemented in Oklahoma City, that it was time to implement the program,” Lumbley wrote.

Lumbley's decision means the department and the union will again have to enter discussions on how to move forward.

About the program

The pilot program was authorized by the Oklahoma City Council in January 2014 and also included the hiring of six new employees to handle the legal and technical maintenance of the digital evidence. The program included 100 cameras to be shared among 150 officers.

In recent years, the use of police body cameras has become a large part of the public discussion on policing. A Cato institute poll released in January found 92 percent of Americans support requiring officers to wear cameras.

Reached by phone late Tuesday evening, Citty said he disagrees with the ruling but is hopeful the issue will be resolved soon and officers will again start wearing cameras.

Both parties are currently negotiating next year's contract, he said, and the body camera program will now play a larger role in those discussions.

Citty contended that the department should be able to manage its own equipment, adding that supervisors should have every right to monitor their officers.

“It is an open record,” he said of body camera footage. “The public can see it, but a supervisor can't? In reality, (the union doesn't) want anybody to look at it randomly, not even me. What they want is that nobody can come in and pull up the video and look at something random.”

Citty said if the union and the department cannot come to an agreement during the current contract negotiations the dispute will again be handed over to an arbitrator. He hopes it does not go that far, considering the importance of equipping officers with cameras.

“There's more accountability,” he said. “That builds trust. Communication builds trust, and having the video cameras is a part of a new generation of communication.”