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Public must be allowed to watch watchmen

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The Department of Justice announced this week that it has awarded \$23.2 million to 72 law enforcement agencies in 32 states to fund body cameras for police officers. Unfortunately, some of this money will be sent to departments that lack good body camera policies. If the federal government is going to continue to provide these grants, it should make them conditional on policies that promote accountability and transparency.

In recent months, successive high-profile controversies over police abuse have provoked an intense debate throughout the country. Although research on body cameras is limited, what research does exist shows that the introduction of police body cameras is consistently followed by a reduction in use-of-force incidents and complaints against police officers. Both civilians and officers are protected.

But these encouraging signs can backfire without the right kind of policies in place.

For example, the Los Angeles Police Department will receive \$1 million for body cameras, despite having really detrimental policies. The LAPD currently requires officers involved in misconduct or deadly use-of-force incidents to review body camera footage before making a statement, allowing officers an unfair chance to exculpate themselves.

This kind of policy will tend to undermine the public's trust in the police, who may be portrayed as being more interested in protecting their own than they are in unearthing the truth.

The LAPD also, as a matter of policy, will not release body camera footage to the public, which, crucially, defeats much of the purpose behind body cameras. Indeed, LAPD Chief Charlie Beck has said that the department considers body camera footage exempt from public record requests and will only release the footage if required to do so due to a criminal or civil court proceeding.

Again, the public's attitudes toward the LAPD are unlikely to improve as long as body camera footage is exempt from public record requests. It also runs counter to the DOJ's own recommendations.

Its Bureau of Justice Assistance cites the body camera policy implementation proposals outlined by the Police Executive Research Forum, saying that successful grant applicants "will demonstrate a thorough understanding and appreciation of the issues discussed and will incorporate the most important program design elements in their proposal."

PERF's proposal states that "body-worn camera video footage should be made available to the public upon request – not only because the videos are public records but also because doing so enables police departments to demonstrate transparency and openness in their interactions with members of the community."

If the Justice Department is interested in promoting accountability and transparency in law enforcement, stricter conditions should be associated with body camera grants.

If we want body cameras to improve trust between police officers and the communities they serve, we must ensure that the footage is publicly available and that officers don't unfairly use footage to their own advantage.

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