

WALL STREET JOURNAL

Obama Calls for Policing Standards, Funding in Wake of Ferguson

President Asks for Standards for Federal Programs That Give Military Gear to Local Police, \$263 Million for Local Initiatives

By Colleen McCain Nelson and Byron Tau
Dec. 1, 2014

WASHINGTON—The White House on Monday defended federal programs that equip local police departments with military gear but called for new standards to guide them, amid criticism that the programs “militarize” the police and added to tensions during the protests in Ferguson, Mo.

President [Barack Obama](#) said his administration would develop new rules for the programs, adding that more transparency and consistency is needed to ensure that police use the equipment safely. The president, though, isn’t seeking to scale back the programs, and senior administration officials said the focus was on improving oversight.

“We found that in many cases these programs actually serve a very useful purpose,” White House press secretary Josh Earnest said.

The president also asked lawmakers to fund body-worn cameras and other community policing initiatives at a three-year cost of \$263 million. Of that amount, \$75 million would be used to buy as many as 50,000 of the cameras, which record police actions.

Monday’s announcements were among the White House’s first prescriptions for building trust between police and communities after the violent protests in Ferguson. They came on a day when Mr. Obama spent much of his time grappling with the fallout of a [grand jury’s decision](#) not to indict a white police officer for the fatal shooting in August of an unarmed, black 18-year-old in the St. Louis suburb.

Mr. Obama said Monday that events in Ferguson had laid bare “a simmering distrust that exists between too many police departments and too many communities of color.” The steps announced Monday were aimed at ensuring that law-enforcement officials and the communities they serve are partners in battling crime, the president said.

The police response to the protests and violence after the shooting drew attention to federal programs that outfit police with military gear, with [critics saying they create mistrust between law enforcement and communities](#). Supporters say the programs provide useful equipment to police departments that are often strapped for funds.

A review ordered by Mr. Obama, released Monday, reported that the equipment is provided by five agencies, which are governed by a variety of policies. Agencies do little to coordinate efforts and often lack mechanisms to hold police accountable for misusing equipment, the review said.

President Obama speaks with elected officials, religious leaders and law-enforcement authorities Monday about improving police relations. Getty Images

Mr. Obama directed his staff to draft an executive order to develop common standards for the programs. He said the new standards would ensure that law enforcement agencies aren't building a militarized culture.

The president had initially sounded a more critical tone when he called for the review in August, saying that "there is a big difference between our military and our local law enforcement, and we don't want those lines blurred."

Sen. [Rand Paul](#) (R., Ky.) said Monday the law should be changed to end the transfer of military equipment. "If they quit sending bayonets to police forces it'd be a good start," Mr. Paul said.

Trevor Burrus, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said he was concerned by what appeared to be a lack of political will to take a hard look at the transfers of military equipment to police. "It is possible to constrain these programs with oversight, but it doesn't seem like many people are really wanting to do it," Mr. Burrus said. "The gear that they have needs to be reassessed...some of it has no legitimate law enforcement purpose," he said.

The administration's review found that local law-enforcement agencies across the country possess 460,000 pieces of property with military attributes, among them night-vision devices, Humvees and mine-resistant vehicles.

The president also plans to issue an executive order creating a task force on policing, which will look at ways to reduce crime while building public trust, officials said. Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey and Laurie Robinson, a professor at George Mason University and a former assistant attorney general, will lead it, officials said.

Mr. Obama's funding request would increase the use of body-worn cameras, expand training for law-enforcement agencies and take other steps aimed at improving community policing, senior administration officials said.

Jim Bueermann, president of the nonpartisan Police Foundation, praised the push for thousands more body-worn cameras, saying they are the best available technology that could help answer questions about particular interactions with police. Still, cameras alone aren't a panacea, he said.

“This is really about the public’s confidence in the police,” Mr. Bueermann said.

President Obama pushes for a \$200 million community policing initiative in the wake of the shooting in Ferguson, Mo., which includes body cameras. WSJ’s Colleen McCain Nelson joins the News Hub. Photo: Getty.

The administration will ask for the money that would fund the community policing initiative to be included as part of an omnibus spending bill that would keep the government running after its current funding expires Dec. 11. Leaders of both parties had hoped to pass the omnibus bill, which ties together 12 individually tailored spending bills that would fund agencies through September 2015, but it wasn’t clear that they had the votes to do so in the GOP-controlled House.

Mr. Obama and Vice President [Joe Biden](#) met Monday afternoon with several members of the cabinet, young people involved in civil-rights issues and, separately, with elected officials, religious leaders, law-enforcement officials and others to discuss how police departments and citizens can work together to improve relations. Those invited to the White House included the mayors of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Milwaukee and Gary, Ind.

The meetings came one week after a grand jury cleared Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in an investigation into the shooting death of Michael Brown. Mr. Wilson resigned from the force over the weekend.

A federal investigation into whether Mr. Wilson or the Ferguson Police Department violated federal civil-rights laws is ongoing.

U.S. Attorney General [Eric Holder](#), speaking in Atlanta Monday night, said the Justice Department would soon announce new profiling guidance for federal law enforcement. Mr. Holder said the guidance “will institute rigorous new standards—and robust safeguards—to help end racial profiling, once and for all.”

Mr. Holder, whose remarks were briefly interrupted by protesters, spoke during a meeting with African-American church leaders and law-enforcement officials at Ebenezer Baptist Church, the congregation once served by Martin Luther King Jr.

Mr. Holder’s visit to Atlanta was the first of several community meetings that he plans to attend to discuss African-American relations with law enforcement following the protests over Ferguson.

Demonstrations continued Monday, as the advocacy group Ferguson Action helped coordinate some 40 walkouts and demonstrations on campuses and in cities across the U.S. on the anniversary of Rosa Parks’s arrest for refusing to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Ala.

“It sends a message that 59 years after Rosa Parks that small, coordinated action can send a big message,” said Mervyn Marciano, spokesman for Ferguson Action. “There are simple and easy ways for people to plug in and show they connect with Ferguson.”