



AUGUST 31, 2015
CLEVELAND, TN
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CPD launches body cameras

Patrol officers are now video-equipped

Posted Friday, August 7, 2015 11:53 am

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Beginning today, all Cleveland Police Department patrol officers will be equipped with body cameras.

After purchasing the cameras in June and July, CPD has worked over the past month to write the policies and procedures for their use along with a training program.

Body cameras have become standard-issue equipment for police forces nationwide and have become critical tools for law enforcement, as well as a key device for protecting the civil liberties for the public at large.

The Cleveland City Council initially began looking at purchasing the equipment in January. The purchase of body cameras were later recommended by CPD consultant Larry Wallace in his June 22 report to the City Council on CPD policies and procedures.

The cameras were first given to one patrol team for training purposes and over the last day have been distributed to all uniformed officers, with the exception of School Resource Officers (SROs) who will receive the devices at a later date. All CPD vehicles, which are accompanied by a body-worn microphone except for those driven by SROs,

have also been equipped with dashboard cameras.

All officers will have undergone training on use of the cameras before they hit the street with them. This training includes a briefing on CPD's policies and procedures concerning their use.

CPD's official policy states that officers must activate their body-worn camera to record any contact made with the public in the performance of their official duties. The in-car cameras will automatically activate when officers activate their emergency lights, when their weapon-release button is activated, when their vehicle reaches 85 mph and when the vehicle is involved in a crash.

The officers will be able to activate dash cameras at any time and are dictated by CPD policy to activate them for any of the following situations: traffic or felony stops, complainant or accident investigations, when following a suspected DUI offender, during a vehicle pursuit, any time that they may be transporting a third party, during any contact with a person who could be considered "adversarial," and during any general contact with the public as needed.

Policy also states, "Any officer assigned to a unit with a recording system that does not utilize the equipment will be subject to disciplinary action."

According to CPD policy, officers are not to stop a recording until they have completed the service call or traffic stop. Officers are also required to upload all their video to an integrated hard drive at the CPD headquarters at the end of their shifts.

The newly minted policy also states that CPD administrators may use the video footage for training purposes, as well as for administrative investigations and periodic supervisory reviews. Attorneys may also obtain copies of video footage via court writing. Area residents can obtain copies of video footage through an Open Records request, which can be filed through the City of Cleveland.

Not all of the footage captured by the body and in-car cameras are kept indefinitely, and CPD has laid out a retention schedule that works on a sliding scale. Felony arrests and "Miscellaneous Major Events" are kept on the CPD hard drive indefinitely, and misdemeanor arrests and traffic accidents are kept for three years. Traffic citations will be kept on file for one year, while traffic warnings will remain on the hard drive for 30 days.

"They're a positive thing," Interim Chief Mark Gibson said.

He explained, "They'll help us to lower complaints and provide a check and balance system for the officers, allowing us to check their performance and how they're interacting with the public."

Gibson added, "It will help us with training, helping us to review our techniques and our practices. It will help us to see areas that we may need to improve on."

Gibson said the CPD officers support the new strategy.

"Our officers want them," Gibson explained.

He said there have been many frivolous complaints and these devices can clear up these types of issues in a short amount of time.

"Also, if we have officers that are not performing to the standard that we want them to be, we can critique that and review policy, and if there are disciplinary issues to deal with, it can help take care of those as well," Gibson said.