City of Santa Monica

Information Item

Date: July 23, 2015

To: Mayor and City Council

From: Jacqueline Seabrooks, Chief of Police

Subject: Body Worn Cameras for Law Enforcement

Introduction

This information item provides background regarding the Police Department's upcoming pilot project to analyze the feasibility of implementing a Body Worn Camera (BWC) program within the Santa Monica Police Department.

Body Worn Cameras (BWCs), as a technology-based tool for law enforcement agencies, have garnered a great deal of attention across the nation in recent months. Much of the support for BWCs is attributed to this technology's ability to promote police accountability, enhance perceptions of law enforcement transparency, while also providing support to uniformed field personnel. Given the level of increased attention to BWCs, the Santa Monica Police Department will evaluate this technology for use by its uniformed field personnel, both sworn and civilian. The Police Department seeks to be well-prepared and knowledgeable about BWC technology platforms, the logistics involved with system integration, and policy development in the event that the equipment should become mandated, a distinct possibility illustrated by recent legislative discourse at both the state and federal government level.

For these reasons, the Santa Monica Police Department plans to undertake a pilot to study the technology, assess its usefulness in Santa Monica, and determine its ability to enhance the achievement of the Department's public safety goals and objectives. The

pilot program will involve a preparation phase followed by a deployment phase when personnel will utilize the body worn camera equipment in the field to test the technology.

Background

Law enforcement agencies across the country are using BWCs as a potential tool to improve law enforcement interactions with the public. BWCs can provide a visual and audio record of interactions. Some preliminary evidence indicates that the presence of BWCs helps strengthen accountability and transparency, and can assist in deescalating conflicts, circumstances which result in more constructive encounters between the police and members of the community.

According to the National Institute for Justice, a 2013 sample survey conducted by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) indicated that 75% of participating police departments reported not using body worn cameras. However, the aftermath of a string of civil unrest incidents occurring in 2014 and 2015 in the communities of Ferguson, Baltimore, and New York City, has prompted a nationwide conversation about the lawful conduct of police officers. From this conversation emerged an increasing focus on body worn cameras as a tool to increase trust between communities and their police departments.

As agencies continue to explore the value of body worn cameras in their respective communities, state and federal level government agencies and legislative bodies are taking action as well. In California, Assembly Bill 66 proposed specific requirements for law enforcement agencies with regard to body worn cameras. This bill is waiting in the committee process and will be considered again in 2016. At the national level there continues to be a close examination of the technology by Congress as well as the Department of Justice. Regionally, body worn camera pilot programs are underway at several law enforcement agencies including the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Los Angeles Police Department, the Long Beach Police Department, the Pasadena Police Department, and the Beverly Hills Police Department.

Despite the broader environment, the situation in Santa Monica does not demand immediate deployment of body worn cameras. Many of the police departments that have rolled out body worn camera programs with a greater sense of urgency have been in cities with deep divides between the local law enforcement authorities and the communities they serve. Such is not the case here; the Santa Monica Police Department regularly works in partnership with the community to foster a strong sense of respect, trust, and collaboration in contrast to the circumstances leading to the unrest seen in various communities across the nation. Nevertheless, the Police Department will examine the technology in the context of Santa Monica and its Police Department; this effort will include academic support from researchers at California State University, Fullerton.

Discussion

The mission statement of the Santa Monica Police Department directly addresses public trust, clearly illustrating its importance to the goals of the Police Department: "We are dedicated to safeguarding our community by improving quality of life and upholding public trust." Given the importance of public trust, the Police Department has been closely following not only the body worn camera technology development, but also the policy development and the outcomes from body worn camera pilots in other cities.

Until this year, the Police Department's assessment of the technology available for purchase identified a variety of shortcomings in the existing technology; however, advances in the technology include more sophisticated levels of video clarity, memory storage, and other features that speak to the robustness of the tool. Many vendors are expected to time their new product launches with the upcoming conference of the International Association of Police Chiefs this October. The Police Department will be in attendance to assess the latest in body worn cameras technology.

Beyond the technology, the development of internal controls and policies must precede any roll-out of new equipment. The Police Department is already in the process of reviewing the array of policies implemented in other cities as well as utilizing the policy

development tools available through the Department of Justice, the International Chief of Police Association, and the Police Executive Research Forum. Most recently, the Bureau of Justice Assistance at the Department of Justice published a National Body Worn Camera Toolkit. This toolkit is the most extensive of the currently available resources and describes itself as a comprehensive clearinghouse for criminal justice practitioners interested in planning and implementing a body worn camera program in an effort to strengthen community trust and confidence in the justice system and improve officer and community safety.

Even as the Police Department evaluates policies, it must also assess the challenges associated with the internal logistics associated with program implementation, data capture, uploading, storage and retention, privacy concerns, and public disclosure. In April 2015, staff from the Police Department attended a Body Worn Camera symposium hosted by California State University, Fullerton. The symposium topics included the results of a pilot program in Arizona as well as a summary presentation of current research. While research is limited, what does exist indicates departments that implemented body worn camera programs saw a decrease in complaints as well as less use-of-force. There is a theory that the cameras seem to have a “civilizing effect” on the citizen, the police officer, or both.

The Police Department anticipates spending as much as six months to develop policy, collaborate with internal stakeholders, determine the BWC system platform, finalize the structure of the pilot program including a community involvement process, and implement training before deploying equipment. Following that preparation phase, the equipment will be deployed by select sworn and civilian uniformed field personnel for a period of 6 - 12 months, depending on the final structure of the pilot, to test the technology. During this time the Department will continuously assess the program as well as collect data. Following the conclusion of the pilot program, the Police Department will analyze the results and determine next steps.

Summary

Body worn cameras are a fast growing technology tool for police departments. While the dynamics of Santa Monica do not demand an immediate implementation of body worn cameras, the Police Department intends to work to better understand the technology as well as to determine the appropriate approach to the logistics, policy development and training elements. Working with research professors at California State University, Fullerton, the Police Department will create a well-structured pilot study, which will include the collection of data and measuring the impact on the community during the pilot period when the equipment is deployed. At the conclusion, the Santa Monica Police Department will analyze the program findings and determine a path forward with regard to the utility of body worn cameras in Santa Monica and any potential plans to continue deploying the technology.

Prepared By: Nicole Dibling-Moore, Senior Administrative Analyst