

Riverbend City ® Activity

Public Policy Adoption

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Introduction

You are a public policy intern at the Mayor's Office in Riverbend City. Like many American cities, Riverbend City is investigating the possibility of requiring police officers to wear body worn cameras, otherwise known as police cameras or body cameras. These cameras record all interactions made by police officers. The use of these cameras has become more popular in recent years after a deluge of high-profile, officer-involved shootings—in most cases involving suspects who were people of color. Advocates have argued that body cameras will hold police more accountable for their actions. However, there are disadvantages to the use of body cameras as well.

Your task is to examine the issue of body cameras from a policy perspective, and to make a series of recommendations to the mayor's office about whether and/or how to implement these cameras.

Desk

Riverbend City Community Action Center: Your Office

You have an email from Keith Bauer, the mayor of Riverbend City. You should read that now.

Subject: Body cameras for police officers

From: Keith Bauer, Mayor, Riverbend City

Hello,

Thank you so much for your willingness to investigate the difficult policy decision that the city needs to make about body cameras for police officers. Thankfully, Riverbend City has not had a high profile case involving an officer-involved shooting. However, in the past year, we have had two incidents where officers were accused of using excessive forces during arrests. Both of these cases involved young African-American men. Fortunately, neither of these men were injured. Both of the police officers in question were not charged with using excessive force, and this received a good deal of negative publicity. Unfortunately, these incidents have contributed to the damaged relationships between the police department and some of our communities.

The majority of the public is in favor of requiring Riverbend City police officers to use body cameras. In a recent survey, 68 percent of citizens said they were in favor or strongly in favor of these cameras. However, my understanding is that the public is not aware of what a complicated issue this is.

Here's what I'd like for you to do. First of all, read the *Body Worn Camera: Frequently Asked Questions* report. This U.S. Department of Justice report contains crucial background information. Second, I would like for you to interview a number of stakeholders to get a sense of the benefits and costs of requiring the Riverbend City Police Department to implement these cameras. Then I would like you to provide me with your recommendations on this matter.

Thank you so much for you time!

Warmly,
Keith

Attachments:

Body Worn Camera: Frequently Asked Questions
(documents/bwc_faqs.pdf)

Interviews

Riverbend City

Speak to these stakeholders and find out what they think about the issue of body cameras for police officers.

Glen Edwards

Riverbend City Police Chief

As the police chief, I definitely see pros and cons of using body cams. On the one hand, there's evidence that shows a correlation between body cams and a reduction in violence. And by violence, I mean violence both by police officers and to police officers. A 2013 study at the University of Cambridge showed that violence levels can drop by more than 50 percent. That's solid evidence that shows that body cameras can make the streets safer for both police officers and citizens.

The biggest disadvantage to body cameras, however, is that they are very expensive. These units cost about \$1200 apiece, when you figure in the cost of purchasing the unit, as well as the related costs that come with storing and utilizing the data. With about 850 officers, that adds up to just over a million dollars for the first year, with hundreds of dollars of costs in subsequent years involving the data. Because we've had citywide budget cuts, the cost may be prohibitive... or they may come at the cost to some other valuable program. That's why I wonder if there aren't less expensive ways to create the transparency we could get with body cams. It may cheaper to invest in better training for officers, and to increase our community based policing initiatives. These are things we should be doing regardless. And I'm concerned that if we invest in body cams, we'll stop investing in these other critical steps that are needed to improve relations between the police and public. I'm afraid people will see the body cams as a panacea, and they're not.

Paige Flannigan

Riverbend City Police Officer

I know that many officers have concerns about body cams—and I do too—but overall, I think the pros strongly outweigh the cons. For one thing, they're not difficult to use, so why not use them? Did you know how small

they are? The cameras are about the size of a cigarette, and the base can fit easily into an officer's pocket. Yes, the officer has to take the time to turn the camera on. But how hard is that?

I also think the accountability that comes with body cams will be valuable to everyone, police *and* citizens. We'll have video evidence of police who are abusing their power, and we'll also have video of citizens who are breaking the law and acting badly. And I think the body cams will increase people's trust of the police, because we'll be walking around with an accountability measure literally in our pockets. When citizens trust the police, our job is easier and safer, and we have the increased ability to help people.

Rob Randolph

Riverbend City Police Officer

I do have some concerns about body cams. On the one hand, body cams would have been helpful in some of the high-profile cases we've seen of officer-involved shootings. The public deserves to know if an officer has behaved in an improper or illegal way. The evidence provided by body cameras can go a long way in finding out the truth.

However, there are issues with body cameras that we can't afford to ignore. For one thing, the officer has the discretion to turn a body camera on or off. A bad actor could conveniently "forget" to turn the camera on. Also, I'm concerned about privacy issues in relation to body cams. If we truly film everything, we may be filming things that we really shouldn't, like information about sexual assault victims. We could also be endangering witnesses who come to speak to us on the condition of anonymity. Victims of crimes like domestic abuse might be reticent to talk to the police if they know these interactions will be recorded. And even when we're talking about everyday interactions that aren't sensitive, do we really need a record of what every cop does every hour of the workday? I get that as a police officer, I'm in a position of power and need to be scrutinized more than people in other professions. But do I need to be scrutinized all the time? There's a thin line between accountability and my right to privacy.

Amelia Garver

IT Manager, Police Department

Body cameras sound like a simple technological solution to the problem of creating more police transparently. But from an IT perspective, this is not a simple solution at all—and it's a very expensive solution. When you

record what an officer does for 12 hours a day, and you have 850 officers, that is an incredible amount of data that needs to be physically stored somewhere. You need to find physical spaces to warehouse this information. Moreover, that data can't be just thrown into a room—it needs to be cataloged so that it can be accessed. When information is subpoenaed, someone has to search for that data. That can take quite a bit of time, even if the data is catalogued well. And as new data from police officers stacks up, the old data has to be maintained. All of this can be extremely expensive. The police camera units can be purchased for around \$500 to \$700 apiece, but when you work in the expense of managing and maintaining the data, the cost is at least \$1200 apiece—and more in the long run because of the expense of maintaining all that data.

Aside from the cost, there are also ethical issues surrounding this sort of data. For one thing, who has access to the data? What rules and regulations will be in place to assure that the data is used in an ethical way? If the data is used unethically and used to breach privacy, there could be some very real consequences. Think of all the sensitive information that's going to be on those cameras about all kinds of things: domestic abuse, sexual violence, crimes committed by minors, witness testimony. There will be footage of arrests and deaths and violence and corpses. The process of securing this sensitive information is both expensive and a potential ethical quagmire.

Joe Brentman

Accountant, Riverbend City

Body cameras will cost the city at least \$1,000,000 a year. Considering that we just had a round of budget cuts, I can't even begin to imagine where we're going to get the money to pay for this right now. What are you going to cut? Schools? Public transportation? Are there going to be layoffs in the police department? Or layoffs at a different agency? I know body cameras are popular with the public, but they're not going to be popular when the public learns the cost. There's no way the city can absorb a \$1,000,000 budgetary increase.

If the city and the police department decide to prioritize body cams, then I strongly suggest they find a creative way to finance them. First of all, the city should look into federal grants. Start with the Department of Justice—there have been DOJ grants. Second, I suggest the police department consider more economical ways to implement body cameras. Does every officer need one? The department could come up with a strategic plan for prioritizing which officers need them the most. Also, are there strategic ways for prioritizing which data to store, since data storage is so

much of the cost? Is there a way of separating out data that shows routine police interactions with interactions that might need to be reviewed? Do we need to save the data indefinitely? I would suggest investigating what other departments across the country have done to scale back the cost of this program.

Victor Maldonado

Community Organizer

I am strongly in favor of body cams. There have been more incidents that I can count in this country where police have abused their power and injured or killed someone under questionable circumstances. And usually the victims have been people of color. Courts have been unwilling to prosecute officers without solid evidence that excessive force was used. Body cameras would show courts—and the public—if excessive force was used. Or, for that matter, if it was not used. The fact of the matter is that police wield a great deal of power, and because of that, they need to be fully accountable for their behavior to ensure that this power isn't abused.

That said, body cams would be a more worthwhile investment if they were part of a more widespread plan to improve relations between the police department and our citizens. There are other things we can and should be doing to prevent the use of excessive force. Police departments all over the country have been retraining officers in how to deescalate situations without resorting to the use of a weapon. In addition, I can't say enough how badly we need to invest in community based policing initiatives. These initiatives involve building partnerships between the police departments and neighbors to solve neighborhood problems together. This kind of mind shift is badly needed in Riverbend City. When officers are seen as integral parts of neighborhoods and not the enemy, then there's not as much need for accountability tools like body cameras.

Mark Tucker

Group Home Supervisor

I hear the city saying they can't afford body cams. The thing is, they can't afford to not use body cams. You know what's expensive? A culture where the police and citizens—especially young black citizens—are more or less at war with each other. Mass incarceration is one of the biggest and most unnecessary expenses in our society. Employing large numbers officers and militarized equipment is also extremely expensive. Body cameras are

a technology that helps build trust and accountability between the police and the community. If you combine this with other measures, like community based policing, you can make a difference—and save money.

Conclusion

You have completed the Riverbend City: Public Policy Adoption activity

Reflection Questions

Describe the potential implementation of body cameras for the Riverbend City Police Department from a cost-benefits perspective.

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

Are there strategies that Riverbend City or the police department could use to help defray the cost of body cameras? Explain.

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

Based on what you've learned about this issue, what is your recommendations to the Mayor's Office? Would you recommend that body cameras be implemented, and if so, what policy recommendations would you make in relation to this? Would you recommend

that they not be implemented, and if not,
are there other steps you would
recommend?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

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