

St. Louis County, Mo., Police Departments Secure Body-Cam Funding

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(TNS) — ST. LOUIS COUNTY — More police and resident interactions will be captured on video by the end of the year as eight area police departments work together to equip officers with body cameras.

The departments in St. Louis County landed a \$400,000 federal grant to equip about 260 officers with body cameras, hoping that working together will help their smaller departments control costs for the devices and pricey storage beyond the life of the grant, Bellefontaine Neighbors Police Chief Jeremy Ihler said.

In addition to Ihler's department, Brentwood, Bridgeton, Clayton, Moline Acres, Town and Country, Richmond Heights and the University of Missouri-St. Louis police force are participating. Ihler hopes to see all of them outfitted with the new devices in September.

Ihler is working with former St. Louis Police Chief Dan Isom, who is now director of the Regional Justice Information System Commission, to oversee the effort.

REJIS formed as a partnership between St. Louis city and county police departments in 1974. Criminal justice and other governmental agencies in Missouri, Kansas and parts

of Illinois pay REJIS for information technology services and products, such as mobile ticketing.

The government entity will manage the video collected by the cameras from the eight police departments, and could become the hub for body camera video storage for the region and the state, Isom said.

The cost to store video often prices small departments out of the market for body cameras, Isom said, and REJIS is hoping to change that by offering it at a lower cost to multiple agencies through economies of scale.

"Body-worn cameras are one of the hottest topics in law enforcement, and it makes sense that we should figure out how to assist law enforcement in this space and make it easier," Isom said.

Protests that followed the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson prompted many officials to tout body cameras as a way to reduce police use of force complaints and build trust.

Former President Barack Obama started the Task Force on 21st Century Policing program in 2015, in part to pay for body cameras. The Bureau of Justice Assistance has since awarded about \$15 million to \$20 million every year to departments seeking to equip officers with body cameras.

The collaborative nature of the application submitted by the eight departments in St. Louis County gave it an edge, said David Mueller, lead research analyst for REJIS.

Oftentimes, camera manufacturers offer departments steep discounts on pilot programs, but later force those departments to buy back their camera footage should they want to use it in the future, Mueller said.

"The storage cost is the elephant in the room," Mueller said. "A lot of vendors give discounts on the hardware because the storage cost is where they make their money, but our plan is to leverage the REJIS business model by bringing municipalities together to work together."

Uniform policies

The departments will select one vendor for the devices, but each department can pick the kind of camera they want to use. Some cameras mount on eyeglasses, while others mount on collars or at the center of an officer's shirt.

Ihler said the participating departments will adhere to virtually the same policy when it comes to how cameras will be used.

The policy was built upon the recommendations of several police organizations, including the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Body Worn Camera Toolkit, the Police Executive Research Forum and the U.S. Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services, as well as policies from other departments that have won the grant.

Based on those recommendations, Ihler said officers will have discretion when it comes to turning the cameras on and off.

Officers will record all contacts with citizens "in the performance of their official duties," such as traffic stops, pedestrian stops, serving search warrants, domestic violence events, traveling to nonemergency and emergency calls, and transporting prisoners.

Ihler said officers could turn off video recording in moments that should be private, such as when a crime victim is changing clothes. Recording would be prohibited when officers have an expectation of privacy, such as in bathrooms and locker rooms or during work breaks.

"Continuous recording throughout an entire police shift is highly inefficient and costly due to the need to store all the data," Ihler said.

But the camera won't be rolling during casual contacts with citizens. Depending on the type of camera departments pick, some record about 30 seconds before an officer activates them to help ensure at least some of an incident that might escalate is captured before it does.

Though Ihler and Isom hope the use of the cameras will build trust in communities, he cautions that the camera footage alone shouldn't be used to judge an officer's actions.

"We're trying to educate the community that this is one piece of evidence, one piece of the puzzle in terms of what happened," Isom said. "It's not strong enough evidence to make a case alone."

Mixed results

Whether cameras affect police and citizen behavior is unclear.

The most commonly cited study on the effect body cameras have on policing dates to 2012 in Rialto, Calif. Officers there were randomly assigned cameras, and saw reductions in use-of-force incidents and citizen complaints.

But, in 2017, more than 1,000 officers in Washington, D.C., were randomly assigned cameras and later compared to 1,000 who were not. On every metric, which included use-of-force incidents, civilian complaints and charging decisions, the effects were statistically insignificant, according to The New York Times.

And capturing an officer's conduct on body cameras during use-of-force incidents has not always led to criminal convictions.

Locally, several departments already use body cameras, including Ferguson, St. Charles city and Wentzville.

But the two largest local police departments, St. Louis city and St. Louis County, don't use body cameras, though both have completed pilot programs to test their use. The city's took place in December 2015, and the county's dates to September 2014.

In St. Louis County, police leaders have pledged to use money raised from Prop P to equip the department's approximately 900 officers with cameras, but the effort to do so is still in the "evaluation process," said Sgt. Shawn McGuire.

In St. Louis, cost and political issues with the Board of Aldermen have stalled efforts to fund the program for the department's more than 1,000 officers.

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<http://www.govtech.com/public-safety/8-Police-Departments-in-St-Louis-County-Getting-Body-Cameras-After-Joining-Forces-for-Grant.html>