

BJA Body Worn Camera Training & Technical Assistance Sergeant Joseph Freer

Todd Maxwell: Hello, listeners. This is Todd Maxwell again, member of the Bureau of Justice Assistance Body-Worn Camera Team, and today, I'm speaking with Sergeant Joseph Freer from the New York Police Department.

Sergeant Joseph Freer is not only a sergeant in the NYPD, but also (inaudible) certified enterprise administrator and trained project manager professional with years of experience managing high profile and complex technology projects.

Shortly after graduating Villanova University with the Bachelor of Arts, he joined the New York Police Department and has over 12 years of law enforcement experience consisting of patrol, traffic enforcement, community outreach, technology and policy. After serving as a patrol officer in (South Bronx), he's transferred to NYPD Technology Bureau where he was a key member of the project teams, multiple department (inaudible) initiatives.

After his promotion to sergeant, he served as (inaudible) supervisor in Time Square. Shortly thereafter, he's brought into the Community Affairs Bureau where he oversaw special projects including a unique (use) in technology (coverage) initiative.

In 2013, he was assigned to the office of Chief of Department where he is responsible for managing large portfolio and special projects as part of the strategic analysis section, including departments (inaudible) video and gunshot protection pilot programs.

Sergeant Freer, thank you for joining us and speaking with me today. To begin with, why did NYPD decide to do a pilot project instead of just jumping right in to implementing BWC?

Joseph Freer: Well, you know, thanks for having us, Todd. Well, first, our decision to employ body-worn cameras was twofold. Police Commissioner Bratton is a strong supporter of body cameras and had been candid in his belief that, you know, cameras are an effective tool for law enforcement and then for the

future and he's committed to use of technology to improve and advance policing.

Our pilots took a different program path and to many more enforcement organizations. As a result of the civil lawsuit challenging certain policies and practices around Terry stops, what's known as stop-and-frisk here in New York City, in 2013, the Federal District Court mandated a series of remedies which included the body-worn camera pilot program.

This pilot would be under the purview of a federal monitor that's assigned to the NYPD and the stated purpose is to assess whether body-worn cameras can assist in evaluating the constitutionality of these stops and to reduce the number of alleged and constitutional stops.

Commissioner Bratton in his (foresight) initiated a small pilot before the court mandated pilot began offering the department an opportunity to address issues and concerns that may not be recognized in our planning stages. The small pilot allowed us to kind of become more familiar with the body-camera technology and assess the existing infrastructure of the department with an eye towards this larger court mandated pilot.

So, you know, using a pilot as opposed to simply deploying and mandating use of cameras gives us an opportunity to set the benefits of the cameras and looking to identify potential issues. That allowed us to craft the policy for the use of the cameras based in part, you know, among other jurisdictions, stuff we learn from the toolkit and our meetings with other agencies, but as well as based on what we might perceive we need based on the small pilot.

It really puts us in a good position to draft a policy for the larger pilots to address some of the unforeseen issues that we have covered during the smaller pilot and then allowed us to get some experimentation and adjustment that we simply wouldn't have had if we just rolled out a full-scale initiative.

We know policing is a culture that's notoriously resistant to change. In introducing the body cameras, (inaudible) pilot programs a tremendous adjustment but it allows us to sort of ease that transition.

Todd Maxwell: Great. So, you guys had a pilot and then a federal pilot?

Joseph Freer: Right. So, our current pilot program, we did a small pilot program with 54 cameras that we deployed out there around the city in five precincts and one police service area which is a public housing precinct.

We split the pilot evenly between patrol officers and this pilot was a smaller one before we get into a larger court mandated one which will be the thousands of cameras and which we're currently in the procurement phases for.

Todd Maxwell: Got you. So, did you guys go into that first pilot expecting to get some idea of what you need to do in a policy for the one that you knew was coming or (if it's) just told to get an idea. You sort of talked in some of those. But can you elaborate a little bit more on what you guys are sort of hoping to learn from the initial one that you (wanted to) apply.

Joseph Freer: Sure. I mean, we knew from best practices in other departments what a base policy sort of could and should have, but body-cameras, as we know, are – it's an emerging technology. There's nothing really – everyone is kind of trailblazing on this.

So, we wanted to learn the nuts and bolts about how the technology works and the cost associated with such a program, but we also wanted to see how the recordings could affect the prosecutions of crime and the investigation of potential misconduct. We wanted to learn what the feelings of the officers were wearing the cameras should be, along with the reactions of the other officers and supervisors who work with them, as well as the public at large.

So, one of the disadvantages of the small initial pilot before the court (made it) one is that it gave us the opportunity to speak with these participants on a regular basis in formal and informal settings, and allowed us to really gauge the experiences of the participants both positive and negative. And the participating officers also provided, you know, anecdotal evidence of how they received by their colleagues, the courts, the public, et cetera.

And then, all of that, we kind of took that back, took a look at our policy, and then, identified some areas where we want to make improvements for the larger policy in general – for the larger pilot, as you say, in general.

Todd Maxwell: So, you mentioned working with the officers before and after that pilot. Did you have any pre-pilot expectations from the officers and then did any of those change as the pilot went along, so the final findings were a little bit different and their perception is a little bit different with the cameras?

Joseph Freer: Sure. I mean, we conducted an all-volunteer pilot. So, we knew that the officers would be somewhat receptive to it, but we didn't know the degree to which they would be and it was overwhelmingly very positive from the officers.

One thing that we did know that we would adjust going forward is – so, we had just a few officers per shift in the command that were wearing the cameras. It wasn't the entire shift. And, you know, the law enforcement culture (enforcement) put them at somewhat of a disadvantage when, you know, some of the more senior officers were there. There's more junior officers wearing the camera.

You know, it felt that sometimes there's a little (peer) uncomfortableness or peer pressure around them wearing that camera and when to activate it and when not to activate it. So, you know, going forward, we identified that.

In the larger pilot, for example, we're going to have entire shifts wearing the camera so that everybody has it and there's no question of, you know, just say, "Hey, that one cop with a camera" versus now, everybody's got it. So, that was kind of one of the differences and expectations that we had, you know, going forward.

Todd Maxwell: So, you mentioned earlier that you had 54 cameras, I believe, for the initial pilot and you had that (made) in a housing project area. Was that...

Joseph Freer: So, we had in five patrol police precincts, five precincts, and then, one housing patrol area.

Todd Maxwell: OK.

Joseph Freer: You know, we used the human taser for our pilot and we split that evenly three commands a piece and nine cameras were given to each command. So, basically, there's one officer per squad that was issued a camera which, you

know, the remaining officers didn't have it and that's one of the areas we identified going forward.

Todd Maxwell: And how do you guys decide on which areas? And, as a follow up to that question, how will this – those 54 in the area differ from the court mandated, one you're about to begin?

Joseph Freer: Sure. As part of the decision, the judge – well, the judge identified commands that were the highest in these types of Terry stops, the stop, question, and frisk throughout the city. So, these commands were the commands that were may not – that had the highest number of stops and that were identified in the lawsuit.

So, that's how we pick those is we knew these were the commands that were the most problematic in terms of the court decisions. So, that's what we did going forward. We're going to expand this a little more scientifically for the larger pilot and we're going to do probably in the neighborhood of maybe 20 commands and then we're going to identify also a control group of another 20 that match in similar characteristics of the officers and demographics of the command and try to take a little bit more of a study before we decide on any larger base rollout of a program.

Todd Maxwell: Some of the terms you're throwing out there are reminiscent of some of our research spotlight podcasts. Are you guys partnering with a research partner?

Joseph Freer: We do. We have – well, a university here is helping us with some of the work on this pilot and they helped, you know, with the pre-pilot, the small program that we did, and then, they helped with the evaluation of larger. We also have a (fairly) sense of, you know, management and planning group in here that does a lot of our internal research and analysis and they're going to actively participate in this as well.

Todd Maxwell: OK, great. So, how did that preemptive pilot prepare you for this one that's coming up, do you think?

Joseph Freer: So, I mean, we knew about the capabilities of the technology from speaking to the other agencies and all that was met. The main area that differed we found

really was in the adoption component, you know, the officers along there – working with other officers and that sort of peer pressures.

It's an odd word, but for a lack of a better one, I mean, we would call it that, but also, really, in the training component. We had a policy that was pretty straightforward and self-explanatory. But, when we actually started to talk to the officers in formal and informal settings, you know, they had some confusion as to really when did they have to turn it on, when did they have to tag a recording, you know, in a system.

So, our initial training did consist of, you know, classroom lecture on the policy, question and answers. We did some light scenario based exercises. But we think, you know, going forward, when we're building a training program for this main pilot, that, we're going to look for more extensive scenario-based training, so we can start really building that muscle memory into the officers and conditioning and to activate the cameras without really thinking about what they're doing and make them a lot more comfortable with it.

So, rather than just running through a couple of mock scenarios that a group would observe – a group of officers participating in that scenario, we're going to make sure that everyone goes hands on it and gets a lot more experience with, you know, different types of scenarios that (will) craft to really challenge them to apply both the policy and the technology and make sure that, you know, they're never compromising tactics for technology and safety, but that they're going to, you know, record and comply with all the mandates and guidelines that we're going to put.

Todd Maxwell: Thank you. So, based on what you've learned from your initial pilot, would you recommend other agencies doing a pilot program for implementing and why would you recommend that, if so?

Joseph Freer: You know, we would. Smaller organizations – I mean, we recognize that not every police department in the United States is as large as the NYPD. But, you know, smaller organizations may not necessarily institute a pilot program. They can base their deployments off of a lot of the research done both by you

guys at BJA as well, you know, the other larger agencies that have put cameras out there.

I mean, most of the larger agencies are in some form of pilot or active deployment like we are, you know, be it Los Angeles or us. But, for a larger agency, you know, absolutely, it's immensely beneficial because not only are you going to see how this technology works, but how it works within your specific agency.

You know, we identified some bandwidth concerns that we had at some of our satellite sites. We identified issues with, you know, that we never even thought of that. You know, every officer should have it so that we alleviate that peer pressure sort of component. We identified areas where we want to increase scenario-based training.

So, you know, there's best practices and that's great. But, with dynamic large agencies, it's – you really need to just seek and (fix) the tires yourself and kind of find those little things that you know before the pilot is out there and then you have to either pull back or reshape and kind of waste valuable time evaluating it.

So, absolutely, pilot programs are something that's great for these body camera programs, as we all learn. I mean, this is something new again for everybody. The technology has been around a little bit within car video, agencies that didn't have any car video or a little more experienced with it. We don't have a large in car component. It's really limited to our highway patrol, you know, our motor guys.

So, you know, a lot of agencies are adopting cameras. It's a whole new thing for them, management, the public in general. So, a pilot program is a really way to go.

Todd Maxwell: Yes. And I think another big benefit is it allows you to keep evaluating your policy as you go forward. So, you guys have learned, as you stated, multiple things that help you tweak your policy, right?

Joseph Freer: Yes, absolutely. I mean, the policy is going to be a living document. And if any agency thinks that the first time they put that policy out there is going to be one-and-done, I think they're going to find that they're missing stuff.

I mean, we're constantly evolving. We have, you know, five different district attorneys that cover our areas, so five different prosecutors. We have to make sure that everything lives up for the standards to (inaudible) (crafting) one citywide policy, our policy in (inaudible) manuals, our patrol guy (isn't) specific to where the cop works. It's an NYPD manual. So, we have to make sure that we accommodate the demands of everything citywide.

And, you know, I'm sure a lot of other people face multijurisdictional issues that they have to deal with, some of (your transit) departments, et cetera. So, it's important to keep a policy being a living, breathing document and kind of experimenting and seeing where you can make changes to make it the best policy possible.

Todd Maxwell: Thank you, Sergeant, for your – I'm grateful you could speak with us today and share your knowledge on this topic, especially in pilot programs and your policy development.

We encourage other law enforcement, justice, and public safety leaders (and agencies) who are interested in learning more about the implementation of body-worn camera programs to visit the body-worn camera toolkit at www.bj.gov/bwc. Toolkit offers a variety of resources, the agency you can use to help them with their adaption and use for community engagement, policy development, data collection, officer training, and educational purposes.

We encourage listeners to share and promote these resources with your colleagues and staff. And lastly, all these resources and especially the body-worn camera toolkit have been designed as a (natural) resource, (pure) resource. So, please submit your ideas and new content to BWC (inaudible) found in the page.

This is Todd Maxwell from BJA body-worn camera teams signing off and thank you to our listeners who joined us again today.

END