

Body-Worn Camera Training and Technical Assistance

Laura McElroy

Todd Maxwell: Hello again listeners. This is Todd Maxwell, a member of the Bureau of Justice Assistances, (inaudible) camera team and today I'm speaking with Laura McElroy.

As a technical advisor for the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Laura McElroy enjoys shared (shares) best practices building strong relationships with the community to help fight crime through media and social media strategies.

She's spent 11 years as the Director of Communications for the Tampa police department and 16 years as an award winning reporter and anchor. Thank you for joining us today.

Laura McElroy: I'm happy to be here Todd. Thanks.

Todd Maxwell: We're going to jump into questions right away and what are some of the best practices for handling use of force incidents that happen to make the news, in your opinion?

Laura McElroy: Well of course every incident is unique and must be addressed as such but if I was going to try to boil it down to some basic practices to try to effectively impact public messaging during a high profile incident I would say the first step for an agency would be establishing itself as the official source of information. And in this day and age speed of information is really the way to achieve that.

People assume that the local agencies are going to be just as open which means if you're not talking about your critical incident and releasing the accurate information then someone is going to do it for you. And, of course, we know that that information will not be correct so that's going to immediately put you in a defensive position of trying to explain why the false narrative is simply not true.

And we've seen this happen time and time again over the last year so it's always in an agencies best interest to make themselves the official source of

information and that requires that you post, you tweet or you put out a news release as quickly as possible. And I'm not advocating that an agency releases information that will jeopardize an investigation.

I'm just recommending that you start the information flow even with the most basic facts, such as: hometown police department is investigating an officer involved shooting at this location and it occurred at this time and the media can stage at the specific location and the PEIO is responding to the scene.

Something along these lines is key for your agency to establish itself as a source. It lets the community know and it lets the media know that you will be releasing information and that you'll do it as soon as you can.

And when you can't talk about the facts you can always talk about the process, how the investigation will be handled, and to also reassure the public that it's going to be a fair and thorough investigation. So the first step is simply releasing information as quickly as possible and establishing your agency as the official source of information.

The second step that I would recommend is briefing the media at the scene within the first couple of hours. And I would recommend that a Chief or a high ranking Commander conducts this first briefing. At one time a civilian PEIO could handle this and for many years I did it at the Tampa Police Department.

But the reality is the badge carries weight with the public and based on some recent media coverage of the law enforcement I would strongly recommend that a Chief or a Commander conduct this briefing.

And again, even if you're only comfortable with releasing limited details it's still important to conduct a briefing within the first few hours. It sets the tone for how you're going to handle the investigation and how you're going to release information.

And it's also a time for a leader to emerge. The Chief can be that voice of strength and calm in the community. When violence happens in the community people worry. Is it going to lead to more violence?

Is it going to bring protesters to our communities? Is it going to disrupt their city? And then Chief can be the person that can help and calm those fears and show leadership during a crisis.

The third step that I would suggest is releasing the condition of the suspect and the officers involved in the first few hours. And this can be done via tweet, a post, a news release or even during that commander's first briefing. And again, this is just establishing that you will be open in releasing information and keeping the public informed.

Fourth I would recommend that you release the name of the suspect and the officers involved as quickly as possible. At the Tampa Police Department I established a practice that we would release that information within 24 hours and it helped us to maintain good working relationships with the local media even when the incident was not favorable for our agency.

And now I understand that 24 hours is fast and it might not work for every agency but I still think it's important that you establish a timeframe. That you have the discussion about it and then establish that timeframe whether it's 24 hours, two days, three days or a week that it is in your policy.

And another note worth mentioning, the media is undoubtedly going to learn the name of the suspect and they will report it which then makes them the source of information rather than your agency. And you just always want to maintain that role with the public when the story is about your agency.

And finally the fifth step that I would suggest is one that I affectionately call the Big Dump. I have found that an effective way to impact public messaging is to release details about the incident within the first few days, hence dumping it as quickly as possible.

And rather than – because what we see often with agencies is new details come out over an extended period of time which keeps the story at the top of the mind and the lead story and it also starts to create doubt and questions in the community.

And ultimately takes a toll on your relationship. And the best example that I can share with you is the Las Vegas Special Police and the way they handled a recent in custody death. If you want to Google it it took place at the Venetian Hotel on May 14.

And LVMPD released the basic facts very quickly but then by May 17, which was just three days later, the Under Sheriff held a news conference and he released very detailed information about the incident.

And this is a standard that Vegas has established for itself. That means that their community and the media know that they can rely on it, whether the case is favorable for the agency or not. So if you Google the Las Vegas Metro P.D. website you can see how they handle all of their officer involved shootings. You can read the news release but you can also watch the news brief in its entirety with the Commander.

And they house the briefing on their YouTube page which is exactly how we did it in Tampa, which is probably why I think it's a genius idea. But it's really a great way to make sure that all the accurate facts are out there in the public domain.

Todd Maxwell: Great. Thank you. So, you had touched on this on how important it is to get out in front of a topic for a law enforcement agency. Can you sort of elaborate that and talk about the importance of it and why it's important?

Laura McElroy: Sure. I think that how an agency handles a high profile critical incident can either make or break them. If they are proactive and they have a very swift and strong and organized response then they can actually earn credit with the community for how they handled the crisis for doing the right thing. But if you're slow and they're in a reactive mode and they're disorganized well that's when the media and the public they start to become suspicious.

And that's when they start to condemn and to condemn an agency as incompetent or possibly negligent. So I really can't emphasize enough how important it is to respond quickly in order to get into that drivers seat on the messaging and try to maintain that position throughout the incident and one way to do that is to have a plan ahead of time of how you're going to handle

that critical incident and how you're going to handle the release of public information.

Todd Maxwell: Great. What's a common mistake that law enforcement often makes involving the media?

Laura McElroy: Well back in my – back in the day as we say when I was a reporter we used to joke that on any given day we could be Clark Kent or Superman. And Clark Kent is the nice guy reporter who wants to get a good story, who just wants to make his deadline, and if he's lucky he gets to sit down in an air conditioned restaurant and eat his lunch that way.

But once you withhold information or you lie well then Clark Kent goes into his telephone booth and he becomes Superman. And then all of a sudden you're dealing with a very aggressive reporter. And we see all too often that agencies are dealing with this Superman version of the media.

So as a PEIO I always believed in – very strongly, in avoiding Superman and avoiding him at all costs. And releasing information is a great way to prevent the media from becoming aggressive. And unfortunately releasing information quickly sometimes goes against the grain for officers who are trained to protect information in order to protect the integrity of an investigation.

So it's a delicate balance. But I believe that the PEIO and the Chief and the Commander who is overseeing the investigation if they have an open discussion and really a negotiation on what to release when the incident is taking place I believe they can come to a compromise.

A compromise that will meet both goals: protecting the investigation and keeping the public informed, or in other words, keeping the reporters in the Clark Kent mode.

Todd Maxwell: Thank you. So have you seen BWC, body worn cameras, be used to alleviate the situation effectively?

Laura McElroy: Well the first example that comes to mind is the officer involved shooting last summer in Fresno, California. It happened back on June 25 and the Chief told the community that releasing the body worn camera would jeopardize the investigation. And that he absolutely was not going to release it and shortly after he made that statement somebody in the public released cell phone video that showed the tail end of the incident.

And the video really intensified the protests that were already taking over the city streets and it increased the public outcry over this police shooting. So a little over two weeks later, it was on July 13, the Chief ended up releasing the body worn camera video saying that he was doing it for the greater good of the community and he said that the cell phone incident had sparked emotion but it didn't give the full picture of the incident.

And so in that situation by being proactive the Chief successfully turned around this incident for his agency and for the community because he was proactive and he out there and changed his statement and changed his position and ended up releasing the video. And we actually saw it happen again a few weeks later in Houston when an officer shot and killed an armed man and that was back on July 9.

And the protesters immediately claimed that he was unarmed. And even though Houston had a very restrictive policy about not releasing body worn camera video the Houston Chief went against their own policy and quickly released the video. And they also released a gas station video that captured the entire incident. And it was all about setting the record straight.

And so while the public debate did continue over certain aspects of that case but the video stopped the false narrative claiming that the suspect was unarmed and therefore took the edge off of the intensity that was surrounding that incident. And those are just two examples but there's quite a few of them out there if you get on Google and look around of body worn camera – the release of body worn camera video that helped tell the rest of the story.

Todd Maxwell: It's a very good point because we see a lot of cell phone video that's only captured at the end or the very tail end of an incident whereas a body camera has usually the lead up and the whole thing so it gives a better message.

Laura McElroy: And even if that body worn camera video doesn't capture it and can't tell the rest of the story there is still a benefit to releasing it because people believe that there's something to hide when you don't release it.

And if you immediately say, unfortunately in the commotion or the turmoil of the incident the camera was pointed in the wrong direction and didn't capture the whole incident and you released it it shows them you have nothing to hide. And it keeps the media from going into the telephone booth and becoming Superman and getting aggressive.

Todd Maxwell: That's a good point, thank you. So many – in talking with a lot of agencies, a lot of small medium sized agencies think that this will not happen to them, they won't have any issues like this, they won't have any critical incidents and these only happen to large agencies. Have you seen messaging issue – this messaging issue affect all different sized agencies?

Laura McElroy: Absolutely. To tell you the truth I don't think the size of an agency can make it immune to these types of issues. And the first example that came to mind was the police shooting in Fort Pierce, Florida last year. That's an agency of about 120 officers. And two of them were involved in a controversial shooting of an unarmed black teen last year.

And one of the issues was the lack of body worn camera video. And this was a Chief who is very proactive and was very open about the case but it didn't change the fact that the camera was not in use and therefore there was no footage. And so these are issues, really, that apply to anyone who's wearing a badge or a gun whether they're in a large, a medium, or small size agency.

Todd Maxwell: Great, thank you. So what would be your advice? The best advice you could give to an agency that's thinking about implementing body worn cameras?

Laura McElroy: I would say spend some time as an agency discussing on the front end how you're going to handle body worn camera video when it captures a critical

incident or if it fails to capture the incident. I would say absolutely have a plan in place before it happens because it's just a matter of time until it does happen. And that's just the nature of law enforcement.

And part of that plan should be reflected right in your body worn camera policy. In the ideal world your policy would give the Chief the discretion to release the video if he or she deems that it's in the public's interest. Because as we all know an agency is only as strong as it's relationship with the community.

And being proactive with the media and the public is a good way to build those community relationships. And then you can rely on them when a violent crime occurs. You can reach out to those people that you've partnered with and built a relationship with when you need information to solve a crime.

Todd Maxwell: Great. I just want to thank Laura for joining us today and sharing her knowledge and expertise on this important topic. Thank you for joining us today. I appreciate it.

Laura McElroy: Thanks for having me.

Todd Maxwell: We encourage law enforcement Justice, public safety leaders who's agencies are interested in learning more about the implementation of body worn camera programs to visit the body worn camera toolkit at www.bja.gov/bwc. This toolkit offers a variety of resources that agencies can use to help with the adoption and use of community engagement policy development, data collection, officer training, evidence gathering and educational purposes.

We also encourage listeners to share and promote these resources with your colleagues and staff. All of these resources are your resources and so if you have a new idea for new content or podcast please submit them at the bwc support link at the bottom of the homepage. This is Todd Maxwell from the Bureau of Justice Assistants, body worn camera team signing out. Thanks for joining us.

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