

Bureau of Justice Assistance
CHIEF MAGNUS AND DEPUTY CHIEF ALLWYN BROWN
Body-Worn Camera Interview

MICHAEL ROOSA: Hello, I'm Mike Roosa, a Senior Policy Advisor of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and today I'm speaking with Chief Chris Magnus and Assistant Chief Allwyn Brown of the Richmond, California Police Department, as part of BJA's Body-Worn Camera Podcast Series. Chief Magnus has been the Richmond Police Chief in the San Francisco Bay area for nine years after six years as Police Chief of Fargo, North Dakota.

In his tenure, he has been heavily involved in strengthening relationships between the community and police, reducing violent crime, and implementing reforms in the police department. Chief Magnus has worked with his Assistant Chief Allwyn Brown in overseeing Richmond's adoption of body-worn cameras, which began earlier this year.

Chief Magnus, Assistant Chief Brown, thank you for speaking with me today.

CHIEF CHRIS MAGNUS: Nice to be with you.

DEPUTY CHIEF ALLWYN BROWN: Thanks for having us.

MICHAEL ROOSA: To start, can you explain what your most important policy considerations were when establishing a body-worn camera program as a medium sized agency?

CHIEF CHRIS MAGNUS: Well, I think that there are a number of things that have to be considered, not that they're necessarily that complicated, in fact, they're really fairly commonsense steps that one would take when implementing any kind of new technology that has such a big impact on your employees and the community. And so I guess I would say the first step really is talking with your employees, with the officers that are going to be wearing the cameras.

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And having a conversation whether it's with the Union that represents them, or if they're unrepresented just with the employees as a whole, about you know, the purpose behind the cameras, the idea that the goal here is not to be, so much spying on people, or catching them doing something wrong, but rather as a way of documenting evidence and statements from people, helping them with their investigations and improving the quality of those investigations, and also protecting them from serious complaints.

It's no secret that there are a number of complaints that come in from the public, that sometimes are exaggerated, or in some cases are even outright false, and the cameras are extremely helpful in terms of documenting what really happened on an incident, putting things in context and really being of benefit to officers who are out there doing a good job, as most of our cops are.

So, I think having those conversations initially, involving the officers in both helping to test and select the equipment, and helping to construct the policies, all of that are steps that can be taken without much difficulty that pay big dividends.

I think the other piece involves talking to the community and helping them to understand what you're implementing and why, engaging with the various stakeholders, whether it be community groups, advocacy organizations, such as the ACLU, police oversight groups, any of these folks can be very helpful in terms of helping to construct policy, supporting the implementation of a program, and being there to provide input along the way.

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So, a lot of those things can be done, with really little to no financial commitment, but the dividends are significant.

MICHAEL ROOSA: So, officer buy-in and community buy-in are critical to the steps, where did that leave the agency, and the agency's opinion on allowing officers to view their body-worn camera video prior to making a statement or writing a report?

CHIEF CHRIS MAGNUS: Well, this is an area that is obviously a little bit controversial, and different agencies that have really equally good camera programs, sometimes reach different conclusions about this, after talking with their bargaining unit, their attorney's, other stakeholders who were involved.

We've taking the position that for day-to-day calls and incidents that officers are involved in, they're welcome to look at that camera footage, refer to that in terms of helping them write their reports or refresh their memory about things. Much like they would refer to notes that they take in the field.

So, we don't have any problem with that, on an ordinary, sort of, day-to-day basis, but, you know, for officer-involved shootings or other incidents involving deadly force, what we've done is taken a position that officers should write their report first based on their perception of what they were facing at the time of the incident, not based on what they see afterwards in the camera footage.

That perception of what they experienced in the field, can really be much greater and much more important, and in many ways more helpful to them than the limited view that a camera provides. Now, after they write that initial report based on their recollection and perceptions of what happened in the field, we do

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allow them to view the footage and they can write secondary supplementary report if they choose.

But we've really found that there are a lot of times where what the officer was experiencing, perceiving, or seeing out in the field that caused them to use deadly force was a much greater set of variables and factors than what a camera could pick, particularly from one particular vantage point.

So, you know, that's been our approach. But again, different agencies have reached different positions on this, and I think a lot of it has to be what, you know you decide locally makes the most sense.

MICHAEL ROOSA: Sounds like good advice. Are there other tips or advice you maybe picked up from other agencies, early adopters, I know Oakland Police Department was an early adopter, have there been areas where you have been able to leverage their experience to assist you in developing your policies?

DEPUTY CHIEF ALLWYN BROWN: Yeah, so we studied the body-worn cameras for about a year before we deployed, we just deployed this past January, and we've made, you know, several adjustments along the way.

So, probably the most important lesson from Oakland, in particular, was that you have to get into this with a really open mind and some flexibility, with the mind-set that you're going to have to make some adjustments as you go along in terms of getting officers trained on and comfortable with the use of, the technology, that this is kind of a wholesale change, muscle memory, and remembering to go on and off, and you know, the uploading of video and how that gets incorporated into relevant police reports and things of that nature.

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So, important considerations are the equipment that you use, there's several vendors out there, and even that is not that easy of a choice because the technology involved with the body cameras.

Well, it's evolving, the way cameras can be worn, the size of them, if the DVR unit is connected to the lens or not, lots of different considerations there, as well as policy, and we, we think we have a relatively robust body-worn camera, but even how that gets informed, so early on, involving police officers, getting the Police Union involved, interacting with the public, our police commission here, in terms of getting input and buy-in and then as we tested, you know, several different models, getting the feedback from a number of different officers who tested the technology.

And even then when we went to - when we selected a camera and were ready to deploy and even then we did a second round of sort of testing to work out as many bugs as we could before we went to full deployment. And then during full deployment we made several adjustments along the way.

And, I mean, even as recently as last week, we've been discussing, at least as a management team, where we can make some tweaks and adjustments, just to ensure that we're getting maximum value for deploying this technology and that we have a regular audit procedure in place to ensure that cameras are being used correctly and that they really are providing for good feedback in terms of how they can inform future training, how police officers are interacting in the field, and of course for evidence value, is instrumental.

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And we've looked at cases where there have been complaints and body-worn footage has, you know, exonerated the officer, which really puts to rest, you know, police officer's worst fears about this being some sort of device used to spy on them, and it actually serves multiple purposes and those are the things that, you know, we like to get communicated back to the workforce as we move forward.

MICHAEL ROOSA: Great. So, deliberate and steady and expect changes, that's just kind of the, you know, the goal seems to always be moving on us, so we stay focused. But given those goals and the goals of if you're in a county with multiple law enforcement agencies, you know, what types of collaboration are you seeing, or do you expect to happen with the other local police departments, the sheriff, the district attorney's office, around body-worn cameras?

CHIEF CHRIS MAGNUS: Well, there are a lot of opportunities for collaboration. You know, one of the most obvious is from a financial standpoint because being able to purchase a larger number of cameras from the same vendor allows pricing consistent with, you know, economy of scale.

So, there's really some advantage to doing some of the testing and evaluating on a regional basis and then doing one or two orders that involves larger numbers of cameras to get better pricing. Because all of this is expensive equipment, there's just no way around that at this point.

But there are other advantages I think to collaboration, a lot of, you know, in a lot of areas around the country, certainly in ours, officers are going from one jurisdiction to another, whether it's for mutual aid purposes, whether it's to help with large-scale events, sometimes it's a result of pursuits or other type of police

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action, and officers from multiple jurisdictions are working with each other, it's nice when there's some consistency in terms of how body cameras are used, how the body camera evidence is maintained and can be accessed on a regional basis.

Sort of having some consistent expectations from jurisdiction to jurisdiction is very helpful. Another partner I think that's key in this is the District Attorney who again has the regional responsibilities. So, District Attorney or prosecutors obviously have a lot of interest in how this footage is potentially going to be used as evidence.

For example, we found it very helpful in domestic violence or DUI cases, so how long is it held, how is accessed, how is it shared in terms of chain of evidence, how is it maintained, is there confidentially or privacy concerns. All of these are things that need to be considered and that a District Attorney and probably a City Attorney on a more local basis should weigh in on.

So, I mean, I think there is great opportunities for collaboration, going forward, as this technology becomes more widespread there are opportunities to incorporate it into regional training efforts. There's opportunity for better tracking of data.

Really the, the opportunities are pretty extensive, I think.

MICHAEL ROOSA: So, considering the collaboration with the other criminal justice agencies, let's switch over to the community and you did a careful roll-out, well thought-out, I'm curious as to what types of public outreach and education did you execute and what is your plan on continuing that outreach?

CHIEF CHRIS MAGNUS: So, the Deputy Chief mentioned that we talked with our police commission, many communities have some sort of either advisory or

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oversight body, and I would strongly consider that they, or strongly recommend that those bodies be involved in looking at the camera issues.

I think, I also think it's worthwhile, reaching out to your, to your critics or to the skeptics in the community when it comes to policing issues, because this is an opportunity for them to see that you're serious about accountability, that you want to have a robust and effective policy for the implementation of a camera-worn program that they can have some input on.

So, whether it's groups like the ACLU that have actually written up some fairly helpful materials on this, or whether it's other advocacy groups out in the community, neighborhood associations and the like. I think the more, the more input that they're allowed to have, the more investment they feel, you know, that they get out of the program, and really the net benefits for, for everybody are substantial.

MICHAEL ROOSA: So, we've talked about community, we hit policies, and technology, purchasing, economies of scale, even collaboration, what for Richmond is the most important advice that you would give an agency that's considering implementation of the body-worn camera program?

CHIEF CHRIS MAGNUS: Well, I'll start and then I'll ask the Deputy Chief maybe to add his thoughts on this, but I think it's a theme that we've already mentioned a couple of times, which is to go slowly and carefully.

We really spent the better part of a year looking at different policy options, looking at what other agencies around us and frankly around the country were doing with this. There is some excellent materials that have been put out by the

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Police Executive Research Forum, PERF, as well as the IACP and the Cops Office on this.

I think all of those are worth and reading and taking a careful look at. I think testing the different equipment that's out there, every agency, you know, even uniforms from agency to agency differs, so how body cameras might best be worn, given the particular way officers are outfitted in any given jurisdiction are going to vary widely what might work for us here in Richmond, might not make a lot of sense in another jurisdiction where there are perhaps different climate concerns or where the uniform is very different.

I think just taking it slowly and being willing to test, experiment, adjust, get input from both the community and the officers, that really pays pretty good dividends. Deputy Chief what do you think?

DEPUTY CHIEF ALLWYN BROWN: Yeah, I would say, you know, sort of the strong building blocks of a robust body-worn camera program would include good policy, you want to have good participation, engagement, and buy-in not just from the officers who have to deploy these things, but from other constituencies across the spectrum of the community that's going to be served.

And then the equipment, so the technology is evolving pretty rapidly in terms of new innovation, so I think as more and more police departments across the country are deploying these units, manufacturers are getting feedback and then, you know, making adjustments and making things a little bit more user friendly.

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So, I would say, look at the field and see what the latest application is in terms of body-worn cameras and figure out, you know, what fits your agency. And then the other consideration is the storage, so, this video evidence takes up a lot of space, a lot of places have opted for Cloud storage, which is you know, cost effective and, you know, doesn't require you to purchase a server or multiple servers, and then how long you're going to store the data, which overlaps with, you know, what your policy says.

So, I think in general those are the major considerations, of course, there are finer details to be worked out, within each of those areas, but that's a good sort of framework to get started with diving into body-worn cameras.

MICHAEL ROOSA: Great. That's excellent advice, again. Thank you Chief Magnus and Assistant Chief Allwyn Brown. We're very pleased that you could speak with us today to share your knowledge on this important topic.

CHIEF CHRIS MAGNUS: Our pleasure.

DEPUTY CHIEF ALLWYN BROWN: Yeah, happy to be with you, thanks.

MICHAEL ROOSA: So, we encourage law enforcement, justice, and public safety leaders whose 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 adoption, and use for community engagement, policy development, data collection, officer training, and educational purposes.

We also encourage listeners to share and promote their resources with your colleagues and staff. Lastly, all of these resources and especially the Body-Worn Camera Toolkit have been designed as a national resource, your resource.

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Please submit your ideas for new content through the BWC support link at the bottom of the homepage or e-mail askbwc@usdoj.gov. This is Mike Roosa at the Bureau of Justice Assistance signing off. Thank you to our listeners for joining us today.

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