

Alamogordo Police Department receives body cameras

Bryan Betts, Alamogordo 6:56 p.m. MT April 11, 2015



(Photo:)

The black device, about the size and shape of a highlighter, attaches to a head mount and rests right above an officer's ear, a discrete witness to much of what happens while patrolling the city's streets.

Beginning this month, the wearable cameras will capture every interaction between local residents and Alamogordo Police Department officers, whether for a traffic stop or domestic violence situation, during peaceful encounters and those that involve the use of force.

The objective, according to APD, is to create audio and video records that will help law enforcement and the public get at the truth in different situations, particularly those in which the facts are in dispute and

interpretations abound.

The APD became the fourth police department in New Mexico — following Albuquerque, Las Cruces and Roswell — to utilize body cameras when it began assigning the new technology to officers Monday. Every uniformed patrol officer and school resource officer will receive one of the 41 devices the department has purchased to replace the in-car cameras and digital recording devices previously in use, according to an APD press release.

APD Lt. Tracy Corbett said the department purchased the cameras from TASER International as part of a five-year contract for \$170,000, most of which goes toward the cost of video storage.

Departments across the country have been adopting similar wearable body cameras following high-profile incidents of alleged police brutality like the one involving Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, as well as the recent police shooting of Walter Scott in the back in North Charleston, South Carolina. In December, President Obama announced a \$263 million program that would provide funds to purchase body cameras for local police departments, according to a New York Times article.

APD indicated that the cameras will do more than help hold officers accountable though.

Lt. Tim Keelin said the department will be able to use video footage to clear officers of wrongdoing when residents submit complaints, all of which the department investigates. The ability to pull videos for different cases, he said, will speed up the investigation process dramatically.

"They like having someone watching out for them, yes," he said. "That someone is a disinterested third party."

On a ride along in February, APD Officer Rodney Scharmack told the Daily News that he was looking forward to getting a body camera for those cases when supervisors investigate complaints.

"It keeps officers professional, and it's great for evidentiary purposes," he said.

On Thursday, Keelin met with Officer Charlene Ashe to assign her a body camera and show her how to use it.

They started by pairing the device with Ashe's iPhone via Bluetooth, giving her the ability to view the camera's feed on a mobile app. The app also allows officers to view recorded footage on their device and assign titles, case numbers and other identifying details.

Keelin said after each shift officers will dock their cameras at a designated charge station that also uploads the footage to an off-site storage center. Each officer can then access their videos from cloud storage using the website [Evidence.com \(http://Evidence.com\)](http://Evidence.com).

Using the interface, officers can mark locations of evidentiary value in videos, share footage with other officers and print still frames to file with physical evidence. Supervisors can also see the geotagged locations where officers shot videos on a map of the city.

The software automatically records the date and time when each officers worked with a video, creating a digital paper trail for investigators, prosecutors and defense attorneys.

Keelin said the department will keep all footage for at least a month and has the ability to save videos indefinitely if they have evidentiary value. Deleting the footage, he said, would be necessary given limited storage capabilities and the fact that every officer must record every interaction with the public, regardless of the outcome.

"It is a huge amount of information," he said. "I think within the last few days we've gone through 20 gigabytes of information, and that was probably when I just had six officers wearing them."

Journalists and members of the public will be able to request videos through Freedom of Information Act Requests, though Keelin said the department can redact footage deemed inappropriate.

The increased push for body cameras has led some to raise concerns about privacy issues that might develop through their use. The American Civil Liberties Union argues [in a report posted on its website \(https://www.aclu.org/technology-and-liberty/police-body-mounted-cameras-right-policies-place-win-all\)](https://www.aclu.org/technology-and-liberty/police-body-mounted-cameras-right-policies-place-win-all) that the use of body cameras "be accompanied by good privacy policies so that the benefits of the technology are not outweighed by invasions of privacy."

Keelin said officers will be required to use the cameras on all calls, including those inside a residence. State law does not require officers to give notice that they are recording, though he suggested most citizens would readily notice a camera mounted on an officer's head or shoulder.

As of Thursday, the department had assigned cameras to 12 officers, the device's battery taking its place on officers' belts with their handcuffs, radios and firearms.

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