

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

We have recently experienced increased community interest in our use of body worn cameras, and I am glad to have this forum to tell you more about these important devices.

We began our body worn camera (BWC) program a year ago. We purchased Motorola Remote Speaker Mic cameras. These combine a high resolution camera, microphone, and speaker into a compact device placed on a deputy's chest.

The cameras are approximately \$880 apiece. However, like with a cellphone, the initial investment in equipment is small when compared with the ongoing costs. Storage space on cloud-based servers is particularly expensive, and we accumulated 3.35 terabytes of audio and video files in one year. A five year subscription for infrastructure services and the digital evidence management system is \$230,625.00. We retain all video data for 120 days; however, after that period, not all of it may be deleted. Footage from a felony, such as a murder, may need to be retained for several years. The total cost of the program, including cameras, batteries, cables, chargers, adapters, and other accessories is \$281,058.51.

Unlike dashboard cameras, wired to turn on with the blue lights, a deputy must manually activate a BWC. The cameras constantly receive data; to conserve battery life, they only save data from 30 seconds prior to the time of activation. Saving data consumes a great deal of a battery's capacity. In passive mode, a battery lasts approximately six hours. In active save mode, it lasts only two. Although each deputy receives two batteries and a car charger, a busy shift can easily deplete both.

Deputies generally remember to activate their cameras. However, in emergent situations, they may forget or simply be unable to activate the camera as a matter of survival. Recently, a pit bull charged a deputy as he exited his vehicle. The deputy did not have time to turn his camera on before the dog attacked. Fortunately, the situation resolved with only minor injuries to the deputy and no injury to the dog. However, had the deputy needed to shoot the dog, the deputy would have needed to justify his actions AND explain why he did not record the encounter.

Our policy specifies four situations when BWCs should be activated: all enforcement and investigative contacts, traffic stops, self-initiated activity requiring notification to Orange Central Communications, and any other situation that becomes adversarial although it would not otherwise require recording.

Once a deputy activates the camera, it is to remain on until the deputy reasonably believes his or her direct participation in the event is complete, or the situation no longer meets the criterion for recording. Our policy considers the dignity and privacy concerns of the individuals being recorded. A deputy may discontinue recording when these concerns legitimately outweigh any law enforcement interest in the recording.

I admit I had some initial resistance to body cameras, and not only because of the cost of the program. I feared morale might suffer if deputies perceived the program signaled a lack of trust, I thought it would take too much time to upload footage, and I worried activating the camera upon arrival at a complex and dangerous scene might cause distraction and delay.

I am happy to report my skepticism was unwarranted. The cameras preserve visual and audio details of an interaction from the deputy's point of view, which is different from the angle of bystander cell phone video. Numerous times, the recordings have provided irrefutable proof that deputies treat people respectfully and follow agency policy despite danger, chaotic scenes, and verbal abuse. If, however, a recording were to support a complaint, it would be invaluable material to guide decisions about whether the matter was one best addressed through additional training, or if disciplinary action or termination were warranted. In similar fashion, the cameras are useful as part of our field training program. A supervisor is able to hold "film sessions" with a trainee much like a coach does with his or her players.

The recordings also provide protection against frivolous and malicious complaints. I appreciate and specifically want to thank County Commissioner Mark Dorosin for being so persistent and convincing me to move forward with the BWC initiative. The unbiased view from the camera has repeatedly provided opportunities to settle disputes where one person's word differs from the other's. Deputies now welcome the power of video; they have seen it refute dishonest or embellished reports of their actions. They also recognize the cameras document the professionalism with which they approach their duties.

If you see my deputies in the community, feel free to talk to them about our BWC program, and as always, call me if you have questions or concerns.